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Illustrator • Riv
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Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles
Eternal You

"I'VE COME... TO SAVE YOU,"
Rio said gently to Miharu with an awkward smile.

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles

"W-WAIT, THAT'S NOT IT! MII-MIHARU! THIS IS A MIS-UNDERSTANDING..."
The peach-haired girl tilted her head in question, steadily watching Miharu before suddenly clinging to Rio. The blanket that covered her fluttered up, making Rio's body flinch, whereas Miharu's face had reached its peak in redness.

Prologue: Latifa's Secret Diary

Today, on a whim, I decided to start a diary.

Almost two years have passed since Onii-chan left the village; I've studied a lot in that time, learned a lot of difficult words, and can now write sentences properly. That's why I wanted to write down all of the fun things that have happened in the village every day, so that Onii-chan can read it, too. That way, we'll be able to talk about everything that's happened together.

While I'm at it, I'd be super happy if Onii-chan praised me for studying so hard, too.

Ehehe, just imagining it makes me happy already.

And so, I'd like to start my diary right away by writing about what happened today.

Today was a wonderful, clear, autumn day. It was a tiny bit chilly, possibly because winter was approaching, but being in the warm rays of sunlight felt very nice. As I was talking to Vera and Arslan, I thought about how fun it would be to go for a walk with Onii-chan on a day like this.

But that aside, now that I'm writing a diary and consciously thinking about it, I realized there are so many fun and happy things happening around me.

Sara, Orphia, Alma, Vera, Arslan, Uzuma, Granny Ursula, Mr. Syldora, Mr. Dominic… I'm with so many kind people every day, and I'm able to talk about so many fun things with them.

Yes, I am a very lucky person — and it's all thanks to Onii-chan.

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Onii-chan saved me from that pitch-black darkness. Without Onii-chan, I wouldn't be here right now.

I'm so grateful for Onii-chan, I can barely look him in the eye.

But, right now, Onii-chan is on a journey outside of the village. He's looking for his mom and dad — of this world — in a faraway place called the Yagumo region.

To be honest, not having Onii-chan beside me is a little lonely, but I understand. I know exactly how precious Onii-chan's memories of his late mother must be.

I don't have a lot of memories of my mom here, but even so, I can faintly remember being gently embraced in her arms many times. When I imagine my previous self in Onii-chan's current place, I feel very sad.

That's why... How should I put this? I can't really express myself well, but I think... I can understand how Onii-chan must be feeling. It's lonely, but I must endure it.

Anyway, Onii-chan and I are tied together by a miracle of fate, because my previous self has met the previous Onii-chan before, too. That's why, no matter how far apart we are, I believe our hearts are strongly linked. Onii-chan even told me lots of stories I didn't know about his previous self, before he left the village.

In this vast world, the only one who knows about the previous Onii-chan is me... No one else. When I think of it that way, it makes me wonder if I'm actually a very special person to Onii-chan.

Ehehe.

However, the previous Onii-chan had family and an extremely precious person to him, so I don't know if I'm as special as that person... It makes me wonder sometimes.

Even so, I can't let myself be discouraged! I'll surely become someone special to him!

That's what I've decided... because I love him. Both the present Onii-chan, and the previous Onii-chan.

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That's why I'll become someone who can stand proudly, even if those precious people of Onii-chan's were to appear before me, as the current Onii-chan's little sister! Ehem!

So, I was writing whatever came to mind just now, but keeping a diary might actually be pretty fun! All of those memories of Onii-chan resurfaced, and my brush kept moving steadily across the page.

Ah, but now I want to see Onii-chan again. What should I do…

Wait, huh…? I just read over my writing… Isn't this more like I'm writing a love letter of my feelings for Onii-chan, rather than a diary? Now I'm going to be too embarrassed to show anyone else…

No, no… Well, I didn't intend on showing anyone in the first place… As for Onii-chan… It'll be fine if I just read it out loud to him, right?

Yeah, that's right! I'll write more diary-like entries starting tomorrow. Ehehe.

Okay, time for the closing words.

I hope Onii-chan comes back soon!

— Diary, Day 1.

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Chapter 1: Homecoming

Year 999 of the Holy Era. Late fall.

At the village of the spirit folk, just before the sun was to set…

In a room at the residence of the werefox Ursula, who was one of the three head elders of the village, Latifa finished writing her diary and put her quill down with a satisfied nod.

This is good enough for the first day, I think.

She picked up the journal she had just written in and stared at it intently.

"…This really is too embarrassing to show anyone else. I wrote about so much… I'll have to put it away so that no one else can find it," she murmured as she stood up, then glanced around the room.

"All right… there." After fitting her diary into the corner of the bookshelf, she beamed with an innocent smile.

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Meanwhile, at the same time, Rio was flying through the skies above the great forest, where the spirit folk lived.

Many layers of wide-range sorcery force field stretched around the village, but the most powerful barrier among them was composed of anti-detection sorcery that could only be infiltrated with a certain level of spirit arts training.

The anti-detection effect was considerably weaker against intruders approaching from the air, but the villagers were informed from the moment they entered the barrier's range. Even Rio, who was flying closer through the sky, would probably be detected soon.

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At last, Rio thought sentimentally as he looked upon the giant tree of Dryas, towering near the village.

Roughly two weeks had passed since Rio had departed from the Yagumo region; even though he could fly with spirit arts, it had been a long journey.

As Rio immersed himself deep in thought, a tingling sensation ran through his entire body. He had entered the barrier, meaning the village would undoubtedly be able to sense his presence as an outsider. With the village right before his eyes, it was only a matter of time before someone came flying out at him.

Rio halted in his flight and remained airborne.

I wonder if everyone's doing well. Especially Latifa… He smiled at the nostalgic memories that surfaced.

He hadn't seen her for nearly two years. *Maybe she'll be mad at me*, he wondered to himself.

After several minutes of waiting, Rio spotted a group of people flying toward him from the direction of the village.

"That's… Orphia's Ariel."

He enhanced his vision with spirit arts and strained his eyes to see. Ariel was the middle class spirit the high elf girl Orphia was contracted to. Several figures were riding on the back of the beautiful, giant bird that looked similar to an eagle, and there were more figures flying alongside it by themselves.

The group seemed to have locked onto Rio's figure, as they were making their way straight toward him. Their figures gradually grew larger and clearer in Rio's vision, until eventually —

"Onii-chan!"

A familiar voice could be heard — the voice of an innocent and adorable girl. The owner of said voice was waving enthusiastically at Rio. Despite the group being fully-armed, there was no trace of hostility in the air, so Rio was all smiles as he returned the enthusiastic wave.

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Immediately after, Ariel accelerated dramatically and closed in on Rio ahead of the others. In no time at all, Ariel had closed the distance between them, before continuing to soar higher right in front of Rio. Rio followed the sight with his eyes, then caught sight of a single girl jumping down from Ariel's back. Rio rose nearly reflexively and caught the girl with a hug.

"Oops…"

"Welcome home, Onii-chan!" The werefox girl — Latifa — shouted as she fit snugly into Rio's arms.

"I'm home. Jumping down like that is dangerous, you know?" Rio warned her with a wry smile.

"It's fine, because I knew Onii-chan would be sure to catch me," Latifa said with a carefree smile.

Rio couldn't help but soften his expression. Unable to conjure up any additional words of warning for her, he gently petted her head.

"Ehehe." Latifa grinned bashfully and rubbed her head against Rio's chest.

"You've grown bigger, Latifa."

"Yup. Of course I have — I'm nearly thirteen years old now!"

"I see. I'm glad you're doing well… and to see everyone else is still the same, too. It's been a while… I'm home," Rio said with a happy smile and turned to the other faces hovering in the air.

The silver werewolf Sara and dwarf Alma were seated on Ariel's back as Orphia floated in the air beside them. Uzuma, the winged werebeast who served the village as a warrior, was also nearby.

"Long time no see, Lord Rio. I am most relieved to see you are well, and to see that you have bulked up a fair bit, too. Perhaps you are even stronger now?" Uzuma said cheerfully.

"He really has. Rio, you look a lot more mature now. And very cool!" Orphia nodded in agreement.

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“Thank you very much, both of you. I’m in the middle of my growth spurt,” Rio said bashfully.

“Fufufu. Rio’s so adult-like now, it seems Sara and Alma are feeling a little shy,” Orphia said with a mischievous smile, looking toward Sara and Alma. The two girls had been looking at Rio in awe when the spotlight landed on them, making them both flinch.

“I-I’m not acting shy at all!” Sara objected in a fluster.

“Sara’s the only one shy here. I was only thinking about how the air around Rio had changed a lot.” Alma turned her face away and excused herself with feigned composure.

“T-There you go again, saying things like that. It’s so obvious you’re feeling embarrassed, too!” Sara retorted without a moment’s delay.

“Sara was the one captivated by the sight of Rio.”

“Waaah, Alma! Don’t say such weird things!”

Alma and Sara’s usual back and forth unfolded before the group, making Rio let out a small chuckle.

“...Hmph, why are you laughing, Rio?” Sara asked with an admonishing expression.

“It’s nothing. I was just thinking about how it really feels like I’ve come home. The two of you have both turned into mature young women. It’s wonderful,” Rio answered as though he was holding back his amusement.

“Uh... T-Thank you very much,” Sara said with a blush on her cheeks. However —

“...I haven’t changed much, though,” Alma replied with a pout on her lips.

“That’s not true. You look more mature now than before, and you’ve grown a little taller too, haven’t you?” Rio said with a smile, shaking his head.

“...Well, yes, a little,” Alma nodded gently with a happy smile.

“Hmph. That must be nice, you two. Being praised by Rio like that,” Orphia muttered, envious.

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“You’ve become more beautiful as well, Orphia. You seem even more calm and composed than before,” Rio said, complimenting her with a faint smile.

In fact, Sara, Orphia, and Alma were all in the middle of their growth period, so they had matured a lot since he had seen them last.

“Ehehe, thank you very much,” Orphia said with a broad, happy smile.

Just then, Latifa tugged at Rio’s coat from where she was being carried, and turned her expectant gaze up to him.

“Latifa’s also much more like a mature woman,” Rio laughed in amusement.

“Yup!” Latifa replied with a smile that stretched from ear to ear.

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After their initial greetings, Rio was led by Sara and the others as they descended into the village square. A large number of village children, who were playing there, noticed the group sink down from the skies.

“Welcome home, Rio!” Sara’s little sister, the silver werewolf Vera, came bounding over energetically.

“Hi, Vera — I’m home. I see you’re as lively as ever.”

“That’s right! And I see you’re close to Latifa, as always! Good for you, Latifa. You got to meet up with your beloved brother again!” Vera said, looking at Latifa being carried bridal-style in Rio’s arms.

“Yup! Thank you, Vera!” Latifa thanked her as she clung to Rio. She had been sticking right by his side since earlier.

“Please allow me to give Rio a hug later. I wanted to see him again, too,” Vera pleaded and waved her tail around happily.

“Sure, we can hug Onii-chan together!” Latifa nodded readily.

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“Thank you for always being friends with Latifa. You’ve grown bigger, too, Arslan.” Rio said with a smile, turning to the werelion boy Arslan who had followed after Vera and stood motionless to the side.

“R-Right. Long time no see, Rio,” Arslan replied somewhat shyly. He gave a small shrug of his shoulders.

“Rio’s the one who’s gotten bigger and bulkier. You look a lot more adult-like than before.” Vera’s beautiful, silver hair fluttered in the wind as she looked up at Rio in amazement.

“Thank you. Sara and the others said the same.” Rio chuckled and looked toward Sara. Her eyes met Rio’s eyes, and she looked away in embarrassment.

“Fufufu. It seems my sister is too shy to look at a grown-up Rio,” Vera said with a complacent smile.

“I-I’m just nervous!”

As Sara refuted Vera in a fluster, Rio averted his gaze with a strained smile. Sara glanced at his profile.

Ugh… It’s all because Alma said those things. He’d definitely find me strange for panicking like this, Sara thought to herself.

Indeed, she was nervous — Rio looked a lot more mature than before. He had a calm air about him when they had lived together previously, but there was still something innocent and fleeting about him back then. Now, she could feel a sharp and intimidating steadiness to him, making him seem strangely mature despite his young appearance.

His body had also become sturdier, his movements were as guarded as always, and there was no doubting the fact he had become stronger.

He must have grown mentally, too, so it was possible that his new disposition was seeping into the air around him.

With that thought, Sara came to her own conclusion. *I’ll have to have Rio spar with me sometime soon. I need to show him he isn’t the only one who’s grown!* she thought eagerly.

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At some point, the children in the square had gathered around Rio.

“Welcome back, Rio!”

“You went outside the village, right? What was it like?”

“Did you grow taller, Rio?”

“Rio, souvenirs! Souvenirs!”

They were all speaking at once.

“Rio won’t be able to answer anything if you guys all ask so many questions at once. Be more considerate and wait your turn. Anyway, the sun’s about to set, so it’s almost time for you guys to go home,” Sara warned the little boys and girls of the village in the tone of an older sister.

“Eeeh, but we wanna talk more!”

“Where are you guys going, Sara?”

“We wanna go with you!” The children all wailed.

Instead of asking the strict Sara, the children were shrewd enough to persistently plead at the gentle Orphia and Alma, who was unexpectedly good at caring for children.

“Geez, we’re going to see the head elders! You’ll be scolded if you keep making a fuss. Orphia and Alma, you two need to stop spoiling them so much,” Sara said strongly, reprimanding them.

“Geh, there’ll be lots of adults!”

“Aww…”

“Let’s go home! Home time!”

The children finally backed down.

“Vera, Arslan, you two make sure the smaller kids make it home safely.”

“Okay, got it!”

“Sure, leave it to us, Sara.”

At Sara’s order, Vera and Arslan nodded.

“Shall we get going, then, Rio?”

Thus, Rio was led to the town hall where the head elders were waiting.

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That night, in the cafeteria of the town hall…

After Rio had greeted all of the elders and informed them of his return, the head elders held a small welcome party for him.

In attendance was Rio as the guest of honor, the three head elders — high elf Syldora, elder dwarf Dominic, and werefox Ursula — as well as Latifa and the three girls who used to live together with them: Sara, Orphia, and Alma.

“I must say, you’ve grown into quite the adult. I’ll check to see whether your equipment needs any adjustments, so pop by my place sometime tomorrow. Was there anything about the equipment that you were less than pleased about?” Dominic asked as he poured sake into his cup. “Thank you very much,” Rio thanked him brightly. “Its ease of use was of the highest quality, but if I had to pick something I was unhappy with… I’d say its high quality drew too much attention, perhaps?”

“Wahaha, that makes sense… I see, I see. That sounds about right.” Dominic laughed heartily.

“Lord Rio, I heard that you were able to fulfill the goal of your journey. If it is all right with you, would you share some stories of the Yagumo region? I’m sure the girls are interested in hearing about it, too,” Ursula said as she looked at Sara and the others.

“Sure, I wouldn’t mind,” Rio nodded agreeably, then started to recount his journey.

He told them about how he couldn’t find any clues about his parents in the first few months, how he wandered the Yagumo region endlessly, and how he walked through several hundred towns and villages until he finally met his grandmother and learned of his cousin, before beginning his life in their village.

When he told them of Yuba and Ruri’s existence, Latifa

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spoke up.

"So, Onii-chan had a granny and cousin…" Latifa murmured from where she sat beside Rio, listening with round eyes.

"When I told them I had an adopted sister, they said they wanted to meet you, too. But I didn't tell them about this village, so I couldn't bring them here to see you," Rio told her gently.

"…I would've liked to see them, too, I think," Latifa responded hesitantly.

"…Hmm. Well, if it was Lord Rio's family, then it may be possible for a temporary stay to be permitted under certain circumstances. But the Yagumo region is far… Well, let's set that aside for now," Ursula said worriedly, a strange weight to her words. Syldora and Dominic also carried troubled expressions and strained smiles, while Latifa and the other girls tilted their heads in confusion. Rio reacted similarly, unable to comprehend the meaning behind Ursula's words.

…I guess it'd be better to hide the fact mom was born as royalty. It might result in the topic of my past being dragged on forever, and it's meant to be kept secret, anyway, Rio thought, detaching himself from the conversation to decide how much he could reveal to Ursula and the others; he didn't want to cause the conversation to take a darker turn through a slip of the tongue.

"So, Rio, how long will you be staying here this time?" Syldora asked, changing the subject.

"At most, a few months. I'm thinking of leaving the village before winter begins, to head for the Strahl region," Rio answered with a serious look, straightening himself.

"…Onii-chan, are you leaving again?" Latifa asked sadly, pouting with unhappiness.

"I'm sorry, Latifa. I'll make sure to return a little earlier this time," Rio apologized with a strained smile.

Latifa grabbed onto Rio's sleeve unhappily and looked up

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at him. “…You promise?” she asked.

“Yeah, I promise.” Rio nodded his head firmly. The others watched their exchange with pleasant smiles on their faces.

“Lord Rio, was there anything you ran out of during your journey? We shall make preparations for you before you leave on your next trip, so do not hesitate to inform us,” Ursula suggested brightly.

“Thank you very much. I still have plenty of stock with me, but there was one thing I thought of on my journey… I would be grateful if you could lend me your knowledge,” Rio said, bringing up his request carefully.

“Hohoho, that is fine. Speak your mind,” Ursula agreed readily.

Rio explained the idea that he had come up with while he was in the Yagumo region. “I was actually thinking of building a house to stay in on my journey, one that could be carried around in the Time-Space Cache.”

“Oho, a portable house, you say? Now that’s an interesting thought.” Dominic immediately showed strong interest; his natural architectural instincts as a dwarf had probably been roused.

“A house to carry around… That would mean a house with no foundation would be more preferable, so that it could be placed easily. Is that correct?” Ursula asked.

“Yes. However, it would probably require the use of spirit arts to stabilize the ground every time it was set up. Well… That aspect shouldn’t be a problem for Rio, but…” Dominic mumbled to himself, placing a hand against his mouth.

“…Hum. Dominic won’t be paying attention for a while when he’s in this state. Lord Rio, leave the house idea to him and rest easy. I’m sure a good home will be constructed for you,” Syldora said with a wry smile.

“No, I was just hoping for some advice so that I could build it myself…”

“That’s impossible. Even if you began constructing it

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alone, the dwarves of the village would only swarm you out of interest. It would be best for you to leave the house to Dominic and focus on entertaining Latifa and the girls as much as possible. Isn't that right, Latifa?" Ursula responded cheerfully to Rio's bewilderment, prompting Latifa to speak.

"Yup, I wanna stay with Onii-chan the whole time he's in the village!" Latifa hugged Rio's arm and nodded energetically.

After that, it was decided that Rio's home construction would be left to Dominic and the other dwarves. Rio gave Dominic a simple explanation of the facilities and rooms he had planned, before they wrapped up the day in high spirits.

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"Ehehe!"

The next day, Rio was walking around the village with Latifa and Vera hanging off each of his arms.

Their destination was the spirit shrine built at the foot of the village's giant tree — they were going to greet the spirit of the giant tree, Dryas, and inform her of Rio's return. It was a one hour walk to reach the giant tree from the village on foot, and while the tree was only a stone's throw away by air, they decided to take the opportunity and go on a picnic along the way.

With a troubled expression, Rio let the two cheerful girls have their way. Then, as the three of them were merrily making their way on foot, Rio and the girls passed Anya, the werecat.

"Oh my, if it isn't Rio. I see you're making quite a display upon your return."

She was several years older than Rio, but because her species had long lifespans that aged particularly slowly in their teenage years, she barely looked any different to when Rio last saw her two years ago.

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“Ah, Anya! Good morning!” Latifa and Vera said together, greeting Anya cheerfully.

“Morning. Are the three of you going out to have fun?” Anya asked.

Vera took the initiative to answer first. “Not quite. We’re meeting with my sister and the others after this.”

“Oho, with Lady Sara. Which means Lady Orphia and Lady Alma will be there too. Isn’t that more flowers than you can hold, Rio?” Anya nodded in a show of great interest before grinning at Rio.

“…Long time no see, Anya. I was thinking of paying Lady Dryas a visit, now that I’ve returned to the village,” Rio said with a strained smile, ignoring Anya’s curious gaze.

“Fufufu, looks like you’ve grown a little. As your elder, I’m happy. Not to mention, you’ve become really handsome, too.” Anya nodded with satisfaction and beamed.

“Thank you very much. I see you’re still as beautiful as always, Anya,” Rio thanked her with a grin.

“Nya?!” Anya’s cat ears trembled in shock.

“Nya?” Latifa and Vera both tilted their heads in unison.

“Nya… W-What are you saying, all of a sudden? I’ve got my eye on you,” Anya said in a high-pitched voice; there was a faint blush to her cheeks.

“What’s the matter, Anya?”

“…It’s nothing, Vera. I was just a little surprised Rio tried to flatter me while I was off guard, calling me beautiful of all things. Sheesh, I guess that means it wasn’t your defensive power that grew while you were gone… Since you’re doing it half-naturally, it’s even more wicked. Good grief!” Anya feigned composure as she shook her head at Vera. She muttered the latter half weakly.

“…It wasn’t just flattery,” Rio said in confusion.

“It’s fine, just get going to the Great Dryas already. This blockhead. Don’t keep Lady Sara and the others waiting. I have things to do, so I’ll be going now.”

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With a tired sigh, Anya waved her hand and took her leave. Then, Vera opened her mouth in wonder.

“Didn’t Anya seem a little strange?”

“Ahaha, maybe. But she’s right, we shouldn’t keep Sara and the others waiting, so let’s get going,” Latifa agreed with a faintly strained smile, before pulling Rio’s arm along. Then, they met up with the other girls, and headed toward the giant tree Dryas resided in together.

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The moment Rio and the girls stepped onto the spirit shrine estate, they saw Dryas, who had manifested before them.

“Oh, my. I was wondering who it was, but it looks like the whole gang’s here… Welcome, welcome. I see Rio’s here, too — back already?” Dryas greeted the respectfully quiet party in a friendly tone.

“Yes, I thought I’d drop by and say hello. Everyone made food, so let’s eat together,” Rio explained on behalf of the others.

“My, thank you for taking the trouble. There’s not much here, but I’ll gladly welcome you. Follow me.” Dryas welcomed them happily and directed them inside; Rio and the girls followed her.

Dryas glanced at Rio. “Judging by your current state, your spirit still seems to be asleep, but the presence is stronger than the last time we met. The day it awakens may be approaching… Did anything change while you were on your journey?” she asked as they walked.

“No, nothing in particular comes to mind…”

“I see. Well, come visit me again when it awakens. I’d like to hear its story, and there may be many things I call tell it, too.”

“I will. Thank you very much.”

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As they exchanged words, they arrived at the spirit shrine.

It was a shrine constructed from stone, with a staircase that led directly to the front, where there was a hall reserved for ceremonies that could look over the entire shrine grounds. At the very back across from the hall entrance was an altar.

This time, Rio and the others didn't step up into the hall, instead walking around it and through a door that led further into the building. The door was located directly underneath the hall.

"I had no idea there was such a place under here," Rio said with widened eyes.

Before him was a living space filled with various pieces of furniture. It was roughly 200 square meters in size, with several rooms toward the back.

"The people from the village made the interior. It doesn't get used much, normally, but it's useful when guests come over like this, or when the villagers sleep over in preparation for the Grand Spirit Festival."

"I see." Rio nodded in understanding.

It was basically a guest room. For the record, Dryas' official dwelling was a cavern inside the giant tree, though she had never invited anyone there before.

"But, that aside, let us eat! Something smells great, what did you bring? I'm looking forward to it, fufufu," Dryas said radiantly, looking over at the small packages they were carrying.

"Hehe, today we have the recipes and snacks Rio learned to make in the Yagumo region. I made a few things, too, so please try a little bit of everything," Orphia said with a smile.

After that, the group unwrapped all of the food packages they had carried along and prepared for their meal. They sat down at the round table in the order of Rio, Latifa, Vera, Dryas, Sara, Orphia, and then Alma. Once they had all taken their seats and arranged the dishes on the table, they finally

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began to eat.

“My, the flavor in these vegetables is very rich. It’s delicious. And these steamed foods, too… The vegetable rice goes along with it perfectly.”

Dryas was all smiles as she elegantly filled her cheeks with food.

Spirits couldn’t starve to death, but they were able to refill their magic essence through eating food, to an extent. While there was no need for the food to be prepared in an extravagant manner, Dryas liked to eat homemade cooking, and was rather particular about the taste.

“The chicken with steamed vegetables is yummy. It’s full of flavor.” Vera stuffed her cheeks with rice as she picked up the steamed chicken.

“I like the taro.”

Latifa’s favorite appeared to be the taro with the steamed vegetables. Her small mouth broke out into a smile as she munched on the taro happily, fully enjoying the flavor.

“Hey, you two. You can’t just eat the things you like and nothing else,” Sara scolded with a tired expression.

“Okaaay!” Latifa and Vera gave their drawn-out reply together.

And so, just like that, time passed peacefully.

Once they finished eating, Orphia went to the kitchen and came back carrying tea. After taking the teapot from the tea cozy, she started pouring tea into the cups. The wafting scent of the tea made Rio and the others smile broadly.

“Ehehe, dessert, dessert.”

“It’s dessert time!”

Latifa and Vera were happily humming away as they sniffed at the variety of tea cakes that were placed on the table.

“Go ahead, before it cools,” Orphia said brightly after she finished pouring tea for everyone.

“I’ll do just that, then. Mm, it’s delicious!”

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Dryas smelled the fragrance of the tea with a pleased expression before bringing the cup to her mouth. She grinned widely with happiness when the flavor of the tea spread in her mouth.

“Your tea etiquette is as wonderful as always,” Rio said, praising Orphia.

“Ehehe, thank you very much. I’d like to drink Rio’s tea sometime soon. Let’s have lots of tea parties again,” Orphia requested, grinning bashfully.

Rio nodded pleasantly. “Sure, I’d love to.”

With an embarrassed grin, Orphia peered at Rio’s face and asked once more to make sure. “Yay! That’s a promise, okay?”

Rio nodded and agreed, his smile growing all the larger. That was when Alma, who had been watching them from where she sat beside Rio, started to tug at his sleeve.

“Rio, what kind of snack is this bread? The dough is a little different to what I’m used to…” she asked as she looked up at his face.

“That snack is called a manju. It’s normally filled with a sweet paste made from red bean, but I tried to make them with whipped cream as well this time.”

“Red bean… and whipped cream? It looks delicious. May I try one?”

“Of course.” Alma hesitantly reached for a manju after Rio agreed.

“Then I’ll try one, too.”

“Me too.”

“And me!”

All the girls suddenly reached for the manju at once, and in no time at all, everyone had a manju in their hands.

“It’s so yummy! The texture’s springy and the red bean goes well with the whipped cream!”

As they all took bites of the manju, Vera spoke up with her opinion first. The others also widened their eyes at the

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sweetness that spread throughout their mouth.

“I’m glad you found the taste to your liking.” Rio’s lips turned up in a happy smile.

After that, they chatted noisily with each other as they enjoyed their tea and snacks. Time passed in the blink of an eye, and before long, it was time to wrap things up.

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“Come again soon. I’ll welcome gatherings like today at any time,” Dryas said with a pleasant expression as she saw Rio and the others off.

“Yes, we’ll bring lots of snacks again.” Rio bowed with a gentle smile.

“I’m counting on you to bring more manju. Ah, and please teach Orphia and the others how to make it as well, for when you’ve left on your journey.” It seemed like Dryas had completely fallen for the charms of the manju.

“Sure thing,” Rio agreed cheerfully, making Sara and the others laugh happily in anticipation.

“All right — take care, then. Did you make sure you didn’t forget anything?” Dryas asked.

“Yes,” Rio and the others nodded in unison. Or so they thought —

“Ah, I forgot to invite Arslan to come along, too!” Vera said.

“Ahaha… Come to think of it, you said you’d bring him along before you came to our house. I thought he was busy since he didn’t show up…” Latifa said with a strained smile.

“Ack! I-I got so excited that I forgot. I have to hurry back and apologize!” Vera said with a regretful look.

After that, they all visited Arslan’s house and went through quite a bit to cheer him up from his grumpy mood.

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After that, days in the village passed by in a flash.

Every day was filled with laughter: Rio participated in the tea parties hosted by Orphia, sparred with Sara, Uzuma and the other village warriors, drank with Alma and Dominic, played with Latifa, Vera, Arslan, and the other village kids, and taught the village ladies how to cook the recipes from Yagumo.

Furthermore, while Rio was fully enjoying his life in the

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village, construction of his house was progressing smoothly under Dominic's leadership. On a day two weeks after he had returned to the village, Rio paid a visit to the construction site, where huge numbers of dwarves were busily laboring away. When Dominic spotted Rio, he paused in his supervising and approached Rio with a grin.

"Yo, Rio. You're here."

"Good day, Dominic. I'm sorry for leaving everything to you…" Rio bowed his head in gratitude.

"Don't worry about it — I was the one who wanted to build it. You're not staying in the village for long, so spend as much time with Alma and the others as you can," Dominic said, smacking Rio's arm heartily.

"Truly, thank you very much. Speaking of which, the house is looking far more extravagant than I imagined," Rio said with a faintly apologetic smile, looking around at the construction scene before him, where a huge rock stood that completely occupied the plot, which easily surpassed 200 square meters.

"Hahaha, I know, right?" Dominic agreed with a lively laugh.

"I heard you were processing natural rock to make the house, but are you hollowing it out?"

"Yeah, with spirit arts. It's pretty big — we've extended part of it with space spirit arts, and we'll make a second floor, too, so there'll be lots of rooms."

Rio's smile twitched at the unexpectedly large scale. "Ahaha… That's too much for one person to live alone."

"Well, you'll have a household yourself one day, so I figured I'd make it big enough for that. Although, it wouldn't be enough if you were to take several wives and have children like me…" Dominic said while nodding.

The spirit folk village allowed one husband to take many wives, or even the opposite; Dominic himself had four wives. Because of that experience, Dominic would recommend

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polygamy to Rio at every possible chance.

"No, well, you never know what the future holds, or something, ahaha…" Rio personally had no intention of becoming a polygamist — he didn't even have any desire for marriage — so he could only offer a reserved response with a forced smile.

W-Well, I guess it'll be easier to live in, so it shouldn't be a problem… I think. While the size is a little unexpected, it seems like it's being built exactly as I requested, so I guess they can do what they want, Rio thought in resignation.

The conditions Rio had requested beforehand were for it to blend smoothly with the environment when camping, and that the house was sturdy enough to prevent outside intruders from breaking in. By making the house from a boulder, both of those requests were fulfilled perfectly. With this, he would be able to set a base for his activities outside of the cities when he moved through Strahl.

And so, the two of them continued talking, until —

"Hey, Head Elder Dominic! Do you have a moment?" one of the dwarves on location called.

"Oh, it looks like I'm being summoned. Well, just leave the construction to me, and look forward to its completion. I'll call you immediately when it's done. We can raise a glass in celebration!" Dominic said with a smile, before leaving Rio behind to head for the work site.

"…Looks like I owe the villagers again," Rio muttered, troubled, as he watched the dwarves happily working away.

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Less than a month later, Rio's house made of rock was complete.

The appearance of the home was truly rustic — in fact, apart from the entrance and several small ventilation windows, it looked just like a regular old boulder.

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However, in complete contrast to the exterior, the interior was a wide and comfortable living space with custom-made furniture and all kinds of sorcery woven into its luxurious facilities. It went without saying that a wild housewarming party was held upon its completion, filled with singing and drinks. Furthermore, when Rio immediately moved in upon its completion to test the facilities, it was decided that — naturally — Latifa would live with him too.

After a while, Vera and Arslan also came to sleep over, then Sara and the others were invited partly as their guardians. And so, their lively days continued.

Thus, as winter approached, the new year arrived — year 1000 of the Holy Era. On a day when Rio's departure for the Strahl region was steadily approaching and he was in the bathtub of his stone house…

The interior of the spacious bathing area was purposefully carved into bare stone, making a rocky bath that allowed for an experience similar to an outdoor hot spring. Rio washed his hair, face and body, before finally sinking into the water.

"…Hah."

With a sigh, his fatigue from the day melted away.

Tomorrow's the day, finally, he thought, gazing up at the rock ceiling that was intentionally left bare.

It was so comfortable, he almost wanted to extend his stay, but he didn't want to pamper himself here.

He couldn't afford to stand still.

There was no doubt that unwanted memories from his past would resurface once he returned to Strahl; it was possible he couldn't remain the same person he had been until now.

Even so, he chose to move forward — that was what he had decided when he left the Yagumo region. That was why he had to move forward… Even if he reached the point of no return.

With a deep breath, Rio reaffirmed his resolve.

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“Onii-chan, may I come in?” a cute voice said from the doorway to the bathroom.

“Yeah… Huh?”

Rio nodded reflexively, before he realized something was strange, and looked up at the source of the voice. Latifa, who had been sticking her head out of the changing room area, heard Rio’s reply and stepped into the bathroom hesitantly, clad in nothing but a single bath towel.

“Ehehe.” Latifa grinned shyly.

“…” Unable to close his open mouth, Rio simply stared at her in shock.

Her pale orange hair was tied back to reveal her nape, the towel emphasizing her small and modest chest. Her waist and hips were slender, yet well-balanced, and her legs were lean and white — despite being only thirteen, Latifa was already starting to show her womanly charms.

“O-Onii-chan, it’s embarrassing when you stare at me like that,” Latifa said, fidgeting. With that, Rio snapped back to his senses.

“S-Sorry. Wait, why are you here?!” Rio asked while averting his gaze from Latifa’s body in a panic.

“Umm. I wanted to wash Onii-chan’s back. May I?” Latifa smiled with a bashful yet pleased grin, noticing that Rio was seeing her as a member of the opposite sex and not just a little sister.

“No, of course not. You need to leave immediately,” Rio said with a high-pitched voice.

“I-It’s okay. I-I’m wearing a bath towel, so don’t worry. Not to mention the fact that you’ll be leaving the village tomorrow. So, let me have this just for today?”

“N-No, but…”

“Just for today, please!” Latifa hung onto him insistently when he expressed his reluctance. Since she was leaning into the bathtub from outside of it, the placement of her chest was rather precarious, making Rio beside himself with

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worry.

“N-No means no. Come on, put on your clothes or you’ll catch a cold. Okay?” Rio replied with his eyes averted, unable to find a good way to reject her.

“Hmph, then I’ll just get into the bath with Onii-chan like this. You sure?” Latifa puffed up her cheeks cutely, resisting to the bitter end.

Now that she had gathered up enough courage to come this far, she wasn’t going to back down without a fight. Despite her face being flushed with embarrassment, she tried to remove her bath towel with a trembling hand.

“A-All right! All right, I got it! Calm down, Latifa. You can wash me,” Rio said in a panic as he caught a glimpse of Latifa’s naked body from the corner of his eye. Latifa’s expression lit up; she was beaming.

“R-Really?!”

“…Yeah, just for today,” Rio gave in, nodding.

“Yup! Okay, come over here!” Latifa said, immediately hurrying toward the washing area.

“All right, I’m getting out now.”

“Okay.”

Rio checked that Latifa had looked away, before standing up from the bathtub and swiftly wrapping a towel around his waist. He then walked over to her and sat down on the bath stool in front of her.

“Ehehe.” Latifa’s cheeks warmed happily.

I mean… It’s just a back wash… Rio smiled in amusement.

“Okay, I’m gonna wash you now. Erm, let me know if I miss any spots.”

“Yeah, sure.”

Latifa rubbed the soap against a towel to lather it, then began to awkwardly wash Rio’s back. She seemed to be feeling nervous now that she was in the middle of doing it, moving timidly despite her earlier courage. Silently, she

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rubbed away with her hands, gradually falling into a calm state of mind.

Meanwhile, Rio was still feeling confused, but had regained most of his composure. He couldn't find the words to start a conversation, but he smiled happily at the feeling of Latifa's hands as she was doing her best.

"Latifa, that's enough. Thank you," Rio thanked her after a while, his voice soft.

"O-Okay. I'll pour the water, then."

Splash. Latifa touched the round stone artifact that supplied hot water and filled a tub with water to pour over Rio's back. After repeating that a few times —

"...Onii-chan's back is really big after all," she murmured quietly.

"Really?"

"Yeah... I wonder if it'll be bigger the next time we meet?"

"Who knows? I think I'll stop growing soon, but — wait, L-Latifa?!"

Rio was replying with a strained smile when, suddenly, he could feel a soft sensation against his back. He flinched.

Latifa had suddenly hugged Rio from behind, drawing close enough to rub their cheeks together before he had realized it.

"...What's wrong all of a sudden?" Rio asked, hiding his uneasiness. He could feel Latifa's body heat through her towel; the areas where their skin touching directly was burning hot.

"Hey, Onii-chan... You'll come back to the village again this time, right?" Latifa asked worriedly.

"...Latifa?" Rio called, checking on her.

"You'll come back, right?" Latifa repeated the same question insistently.

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Rio felt as though she had seen right through him. He guiltily averted his eyes, bit down on his lip and closed his eyes, then searched inside himself.

"...If you're waiting for me, I'll return," he answered slowly.

"No — you have to come back," Latifa demanded as she pouted with a sulk.

"...I see. I'll have to come back, then."

Rio forced down the shameful feelings that he had, and spoke with an apologetic, strained smile. Latifa's expression brightened a little.

"Yup. Make sure you come back earlier this time. Please?"

"Yeah. I promised, after all. I'll come back when I can find the time," Rio nodded with a smile.

He felt guilty because of his own reluctance; he wondered if it was really okay for him to have a place to return to when he was setting off on the path of revenge.

However, his desire to return to the village was his pure, honest feelings. And with that, he would return as long as Latifa wanted him to, he decided.

"...By the way, Latifa. You'll catch a cold like that, so let's get in the bath," Rio suggested with a bitter smile to Latifa, who was still hanging onto him.

"Huh...? Ah, okay! That's right, ehehe."

Latifa distanced herself from Rio in a hurry, grinning bashfully.

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The next morning, Rio made his way to the village square, which was where he was to depart from.

The usual faces were there to see him off, along with the village's elders. After Rio finished saying his goodbyes to Sara and the others, the three head elders approached him last.

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“Lord Rio, take this with you,” Ursula said, handing Rio a sparkling, jade-colored spirit stone the size of a fist.

“...Is this spirit stone some kind of magical artifact? Is there some kind of formula sealed in it?” Rio asked, his gaze absorbed by the spirit stone in his hand.

A spirit stone could be used as a magic artifact by having a spell formula sealed within, but it would just look like a spirit stone to those who didn’t have the eye to see essence. The formula within was being reflected in Rio’s eyes.

“This is a teleport crystal — an artifact filled with sorcery that moves the user to a predetermined destination. The activation chant to use it is *Transilio*. I’ve already put the coordinates in, so you can return to the village easily with this. But it’s a one way method of travel, so you won’t be able to return to your starting position,” Ursula explained; the sorcery activation, however, required more than just chanting the keyword in order to prevent an accident from occurring.

“An item like this... Did you recently make it just for me?”

“Indeed. There used to be several of them in the village in the past, but they became unnecessary over our long history. The spirit stones had their formulas removed and were repurposed as other magic artifacts. After all, no one ever leaves the village. But, since you leave the village rather frequently, we figured it would be more convenient for you to have.”

“But the spirit stone is such a high quality. It’s sizable, too. Isn’t it a valuable item?” Rio questioned at Ursula’s generous words.

While a spirit stone could be turned into an artifact with sorcery, it also had a wide range of other uses, such as being a pure energy source for other artifacts, or for storing magic essence to use in case of emergencies. The essence capacity that could be stored varied depending on the quality of the stone, and the color of the stone changed based on the

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amount of essence stored. Among them, stones that could turn emerald green were said to be of high quality — proof it could store a vast amount of essence.

Logically, the bigger the stone, the more essence could be stored. However, because of the difference in stone quality, that reasoning could differ, too.

“It’s nothing; we’ve been making spirit stones for years and years now, so we have plenty of good stones in stock. There’s no need for you to worry.” Ursula shook her head with a smile.

“But even so, I’ve received so many items already… I couldn’t possibly accept any more than what I have. I’ve just returned and had a house built for me, and there was the equipment set and the Time-Space Cache from last time. I’ve received so many other good quality spirit stones, too.” Rio’s expression clouded apologetically.

“Don’t worry about it. Like we said last time, you are our sworn friend. It would be a dishonor to us spirit folk for our sworn friend to depart on a journey empty-handed, so just accept it. Well… it was Syldora and Ursula who made it, actually.” Dominic laughed merrily, looking over at the two of them.

“We simply used a spare spirit stone — the only thing it took was time. Space sorcery has complicated formulas, so it took some effort to get the coordinates right, but it was no big deal.” Syldora shook his head, smiling in faint embarrassment.

“Hohoho, Latifa was lonely while Lord Rio was in Yagumo. Hopefully this will help you return faster this time. We’ll need to discuss further, but it may be a good idea to use that to bring Latifa and Lord Rio’s cousin together for a meeting someday.” Ursula opened her mouth to deal the finishing blow.

“…Thank you very much, truly. For all the things you’ve done for me.” Rio bowed his head deeply.

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“Well, that’s that. Those girls over there would be happier to have you around, kid. Come back a bit more often.” Dominic looked over to Sara, Orphia, and Alma with a grin.

“Head Elder!”

“Grandfather!”

Sara and Alma blushed furiously and yelled in shock. Meanwhile, Orphia was avoiding digging her own grave by smiling cheerfully.

“Ooh, scary, scary.” Dominic shuddered exaggeratedly and quickly made his exit.

Then, Latifa approached Rio with springy footsteps.

“Have a good trip, Onii-chan,” she said, hugging Rio.

“Yeah, I’ll be back soon.” Rio smiled gently and petted Latifa’s head.

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Chapter 2: Upon Returning

Approximately two weeks had passed since his departure from the spirit folk village.

Rio stepped onto Strahl soil for the first time in several years; his current location was the trade city of Amande, located in the western region of the Kingdom of Galarc. As it was a part of Duke Cretia's territory, Rio had once stopped in this city on his way out of the Strahl region.

However, Amande had developed greatly since then, making it quite different compared to how it had been several years ago; it was actually still under development even now. From what Rio could see as he approached through the air, deforestation was occurring, which clearly secured more area for the city.

I guess I'll go down and gather some information first.

Rio wasn't about to brazenly land in the middle of the city, so he descended into the vast forest near Amande instead. Location-wise, Amande was close both to the Kingdom of Beltrum to the west and the Kingdom of Centostella near the south, so it was a good spot to gather foreign information.

After locating a deserted road, he exited the forest to see Amande within view and felt its growth even more strongly. It was a scenery he would have seen several years ago, but it was completely unfamiliar to him now; although with the size of the city expanding, it was only natural that the outer areas would grow larger, too. While he was flying, Rio had seen the sturdy castle walls that surrounded the inner city, but the outer city was only enclosed by wooden fencing.

He entered the city from the east road. *There are so many buildings I don't recognize. Or maybe I just don't remember*

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them?

Rio gazed at the city landscape with curiosity. He had only stayed in Amande for a single day all those years ago, so his memories of the city weren't that clear to begin with. However, the overflowing energy within the city hadn't changed at all. No — it was possible it was bustling even more now than it had been before, with several stalls set up along the main street, their vendors calling for customers' attention.

As Rio walked along the road and fondly reminisced, he finally spotted a certain building in his view. It was the inn he had previously stayed at for one night.

This was where I stayed last time. What was the name of the girl in the inn again? Well, I'm sure she doesn't remember me, either.

Rio smiled bitterly, remembering how a couple of drunks had bothered him and caused a scene. Unfortunately, he had no business with the inn right now, so he passed on by.

Suddenly, six pillars of blinding light shot up in every direction visible from Amande. The pillars of light seemed to be a phenomenon of sorcery or spirit arts, as they were spreading waves of ode and mana all throughout Strahl, even causing the air to tremble. As a result, not only did Rio notice the light pillars immediately with his excellent ode and mana detection abilities as a spirit arts user, but the residents of Amande did, too.

"Look at that!"

"There's one there too!"

"They're all different colors."

"W-Wow, what is it?"

The city was instantly in an uproar; everyone was looking in every direction, gazing at the red, blue, white, green, brown, and yellow pillars.

Rio was staring at the pillars, too, when —

"?!"

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Ba-dump. He felt something like an intense beat within his heart, making him open his eyes widely. He placed a hand against his chest reflexively, and felt a pleasantly warm heat rising within him.

Haruto.

...Haru... ...-er.

...-ve... them.

The strangely familiar voice of a girl echoed in the back of Rio's head.

"...Who is that?"

Rio opened his mouth in amazement. He couldn't make out what she had said, but it was definitely the voice of a girl. But, as far as he could see around him, the owner of the voice didn't appear to be nearby.

Sharpen... your senses.

Go... southeast.

...will be... waiting... there...

The girl's voice echoed again, and in that next moment, Rio felt his senses sharpen dramatically.

"This..."

Rio knew this sensation — he had experienced it once before. He had felt it when he had regained his memories of Amakawa Haruto.

Rio had met Flora as a dirty orphan in a shabby shack, when he was suddenly attacked by an unknown man. He had heard the mysterious voice of a girl back then, too; it sharpened his senses and helped him overcome the crisis at hand.

"...You want me to head southeast?" Rio asked hesitantly, but there was no response. The light pillars had disappeared at some point too.

He had no idea if the voice he heard was real or not, and it was possible that he had just misheard something. However, Rio had one possible explanation in mind.

Is it the voice of the spirit inside me? Rio thought.

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Perhaps the pulsing in his chest just before he heard the voice was caused by the spirit girl residing within him.

The voice had told him to go southeast, because there was someone waiting there. Could that someone be the owner of the voice? If so, it couldn't possibly be the spirit within Rio.

...*I don't know*. Rio shook his head uneasily. Just thinking about it wouldn't give him any answers. But the truth was, the directions came from a girl who had saved him once before.

"...I'll go and take a look."

Rio decided to head southeast for now; he turned on his heel and weaved his way through the chaotic crowds, walking back the way he came to leave the city once more.

Several minutes after that, he entered the forest neighboring the city of Amande, and used his spirit arts to fly up into the air, heading southeast.

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Obeying the order of the voice that echoed in his head, Rio proceeded southeast. However, after nearly an hour of flying at a steady speed and surveying his surroundings, he couldn't find any particular oddities.

The direction to head southeast had been pretty vague to begin with, and he didn't know how far southeast he needed to move. While he had been spurred into action by the situation at hand and the strange sensation in his chest, he had regained his senses by now.

Guess I'll turn back.

Just as he thought that, with his senses that had been strangely sharpened since the events earlier, Rio noticed the ode and mana was heavily disrupted in a corner of the grasslands before him.

"...What's that? The distortion is almost like the aftermath of time-space sorcery..."

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Rio gulped and widened his eyes. Reflected within them was the light of significantly stagnant ode in the air; it was similar to the phenomenon characteristic of the aftermath of using time-space sorcery.

This amount of residual essence is unprecedented. Judging by the way it's disrupted, not much time has passed yet… Did someone use teleportation sorcery? Rio speculated, taking into consideration the situation left before him. However, from what he could see in the air, there was no sign of anyone at the scene nor in the surrounding plains.

There don't seem to be any spell formulas set up. In that case, the teleport sorcery was either to a random destination, or the destination was set to here… At any rate, not even the basics of time-space sorcery could be performed with the standard of sorcery in Strahl. The only possibility would be an ancient artifact. Guess I'll go down and have a look first, Rio speculated, then decided to descend to the spot for now.

As soon as he stepped down onto the grassland, a cold wind noisily brushed against his skin and shook the endless expanse of grass. Rio carefully dragged his gaze over the surroundings, searching for any remaining traces.

This place is a fair distance from the road, and the perfect spot to hide away and do something, but these… are footsteps… Enhanced with spirit arts, Rio's vision discovered the faint footsteps amongst trampled grass.

There were three sets of footprints. Each set headed directly south, right in the direction of Centostella, the kingdom located furthest to the southeast of the Strahl region.

There's no mistaking the fact they arrived by teleportation sorcery. Could these be the people that voice was talking about before? I don't think it could be a coincidence.

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It seemed he would need to investigate further. With a small sigh, Rio flew up into the air and followed the footsteps with his spirit arts.

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Interlude: Adrift in Another World

Merely an hour before Rio arrived at the grasslands, and just as he discovered the spot where ode and mana had been disrupted by time-space sorcery, three Japanese people dressed in peculiar outfits for this world were standing around in the grass.

"...Miharu?" A middle school girl dressed in her uniform timidly called out to Miharu, who was a high school student that wore her uniform, too.

The girls were unaware of the fact that several pillars of light across the Strahl region had pierced into the heavens less than a minute ago. They had no idea what had happened, nor how they had come to this place.

"Ah, erm... It's out of range here. M-Maybe it's broken?" Miharu replied. She had been staring at the "*Out of range*" display on her phone screen in a daze when she realized her name was called. She put on the best smile she could.

"B-Broken...?" The middle school girl's expression clouded with worry.

"Did we... warp, or something?" The primary school boy, dressed in his casual clothes, muttered doubtfully in confusion. The modern townscape they were standing in moments ago had changed to a grassy plain before they had realized it.

In a word, it could only be described as "impossible."

"No way, this isn't one of those games you always play." The middle school girl shot him down point-blank.

"Then how would you explain this situation?" the primary

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school boy objected with a pout.

“I-I don’t know. A-A dream, maybe…”

“That’s not much different than my idea.”

The primary school boy and middle school girl started bickering with each other in somewhat irritated tones, most likely feeling aggressive after being placed in such a bewildering situation.

Miharu took a deep breath and consoled the two children. “Aki-chan, Masato-kun. Let’s calm down and process the situation, okay? Do you two remember where you were before you came here?”

As the eldest, she had to keep herself levelheaded.

“Where we were… Didn’t we all meet up after the opening ceremony at school?” The boy named Masato sighed glumly.

“But weren’t Satsuki-san and Takahisa-kun with us too?” Miharu asked without missing a beat.

“Yeah, they were,” Masato nodded with certainty.

“What about you, Aki-chan?”

Prompted by Miharu, the middle school girl named Aki nodded. “Yeah… We were all together in the residential area.”

“Did the two of you feel anything strange before the landscape changed? Anything you noticed at all. I was talking to Satsuki-san when my vision suddenly looked like it distorted,” Miharu said, explaining the series of events from her own perspective as she questioned the other two.

“…I was talking to my brother when the landscape distorted, I think,” Aki answered with a murmur.

“Now that you mention it, my view also warped…” Masato tilted his head with a hum.

“If the three of us saw the same thing, then it couldn’t be a hallucination… right?” Miharu muttered.

That didn’t change the fact they didn’t know anything about their situation. After all, the peaceful residential area they had been walking through only a short moment ago was

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now a field of grass, leaving nothing but rocks, hills, and mountains in their view; not a single man-made structure was in sight. In the location they were originally at, a sight like this wasn't possible no matter how many kilometers they moved.

Thinking about it calmly, the entire situation was so unscientific that it was starting to feel eerie. Perhaps they actually had warped, like Masato said.

An indescribable fear ran through Miharu, making her shudder faintly.

"Hey, did we really warp after all? Is this even Japan anymore?" Masato asked Miharu and Aki, looking suspiciously at their surroundings.

"We have no way of knowing that, since there's no phone reception out here." Aki shook her head bluntly.

"L-Let's make a decision first," Miharu suggested to the two. "Do we stay here, or do we move?"

The conversation was going around in circles, so she decided to raise her question and change the topic.

"But if we moved, we wouldn't be able to return here anymore. Someone might come to save us... Are you sure?" Aki asked worriedly.

Despite having no evidence to the contrary, she had the vague belief that they could suddenly be returned back to where they came from if they remained here. Her reasoning to stay put and wait for rescue during times of disaster wasn't entirely wrong, either; there was a higher possibility of being saved by preserving their stamina, rather than walking around blindly and using up energy.

However, that would increase the possibility of rescue only when they had the supplies for an extended stay — for example, when climbing a mountain, you would inform someone of what day you plan on returning in advance.

"There's no guarantee anyone will come save us. There aren't even any roads here. Does anyone even know that

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we're here?" The questions Masato was asking were indeed of sound reasoning.

"That's… true, but…" Aki said, pressured into agreeing.

"Even if we stay here, there aren't any walls or a roof to shelter us. It's kind of cold, we have nothing to protect us from the rain, and we barely have any food or water…" Miharu noted, listing all of the disadvantages of remaining where they were. The more she spoke, the more despair she felt for their situation.

"I don't have any food or water."

"Me neither…"

Masato and Aki both paled at once.

"I-I have some tea and biscuits. It'll be fine!" Miharu hurriedly opened her schoolbag, taking out the bottle of tea and the homemade biscuits. She showed them to the other two with cheery encouragement. However, the amount wasn't enough to ease their concerns.

With such limited supplies, even if I gave it all to the two of them, we'd run out of food and water in no time… I have to do something before that happens. While she somehow managed to calmly analyze the situation, impatience was slowly rising within Miharu.

"Hey, let's try to find someone. If we stay here, we'll either starve to death or freeze to death," Masato proposed anxiously. Seeing Miharu's composure had helped him keep his own cool, but he could still keenly feel the precariousness of their current situation.

"What do you think, Aki-chan?" Miharu asked.

"Y-Yeah. I agree… But which way should we go?" Aki nodded hesitantly, looking around the grassland with a worried expression. Miharu didn't know the answer to that either.

"Let's try heading that way, since the other side has mountains in the distance." Miharu stifled her worries and pointed south.

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Once they decided the direction in which to proceed, the three of them started to silently move. They walked for about ten to twenty minutes, but there was still no sign of anything man-made. On the contrary, there wasn't even a single sign of life.

The air was chilly and dry; simply walking parched their throats. After walking for an hour, Miharu made the other two take one sip each of the tea in her bottle. Since this was all the water they had, they needed to ration it economically, but regularly. After all, it was important to keep hydrated when moving.

If only there was a river or something… Miharu thought earnestly as she led the other two, who followed her without complaint.

"…Ah, it's a person… —Hey, isn't that a person?!" Masato suddenly said.

"Huh? …Y-You're right! It's a person, a person! Miharu!" Aki's voice bounced happily.

Far in the distance where Aki and Masato were looking were human-like figures. While they couldn't tell how far away they were, it looked like a large group of people moving in a line. Upon further inspection, creatures that looked like horses were pulling something among them.

That's a horse… right? The inconsistency of the sight with the time period made Miharu pause in shock.

"Hey, Miharu! Aren't we going?! There are people there!" Aki pulled on Miharu's sleeve.

"Y-Yeah. That's… right," Miharu nodded slowly, all while wondering with unease as to where in the world they really were. But it wasn't just unease in her heart, though — there was faint caution, too.

"Heeey!" Unaware of how Miharu was feeling in her heart, Masato yelled loudly and drew attention to their position.

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“Heeey!” Aki followed after Masato.

“Heeey!” Masato and Aki’s voices eventually overlapped with each other. There were people there; placed in a completely unknown situation, the mental relief that fact brought to the two was immeasurably huge.

The two children waved their arms desperately in an appeal as they shouted. Then, having noticed Masato and Aki, several figures left the line at the other end. There were three of them, and they approached Miharu and the others at an oddly fast pace.

Masato and Aki noticed that fact and waved their arms happily.

“...Huh, a horse?”

They soon froze, because they had noticed the figures closing in were on horseback. As Masato and Aki were frozen, the mounted figures came right up to them.

“**** **!” The man riding at the front shouted. The three Japanese students couldn’t understand what he was saying at all.

“***, ****!”

When the leader-like man riding first yelled, the other two came to a halt at once.

The men riding on horseback all had rough facial features, and were clearly not Japanese. They were dressed in light leather armor with dreadfully solid metal swords that were sheathed at their waists.

The men calmed the horses they had just halted and glared down at the three. Aki and Masato backed away in fear.

Miharu was also fearful, but she stood in front of Aki and Masato to protect them.

“Ah, umm... D-Do you understand Japanese?” She opened her mouth to try and say something, then blurted out the first question that came to mind with a trembling voice.

“****’* ****, *** ***?” The apparent leader cocked his

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head suspiciously.

“*Do you know where we are? We seem to be lost…*” Miharu asked in English next, refusing to give up.

“*****.” The man shook his head as though he was giving up on communicating.

“Huh? English is no good, too? Then, umm, what should we do… M-Maybe my pronunciation was bad.”

Unable to come to a mutual understanding, Miharu finally faltered, and her unease continued to increase. She was overwhelmed by the unpleasant throbs in her chest.

Behind Miharu, Aki and Masato had completely shrunken in on themselves in silence. They had never spoken to any foreigners in their lives, so they were frightened.

It was understandable — the other party was equipped with swords, after all.

“****, ***’* *** ***** **** *** ** ****? **** ** **** **** *** ****.” One of the men on horseback stared at Miharu’s face and body with a grin as he said something to the leader. There was no restraint in his gaze, making Miharu fidget slightly.

“****, ***’** *****,” the leader replied to the man with a grin on his mouth. His gaze was also fixed on Miharu.

“*** ***** *** ****’* ** *** ******. *** *****, *** ***** ***** ****.” The third man also said something, his line of sight on Aki and Masato as they stood behind Miharu.

“W-What?”

“Hey, isn’t this kind of bad?” Aki and Masato said as they looked up worriedly at the men holding their conversation between themselves.

“*** *****, *** ****.” The man who appeared to be the leader said something, and the other men immediately dismounted from their horses. They all started casually walking toward Miharu, Aki, and Masato.

Miharu spread her arms before Aki and Masato to protect them, placing herself in the line of fire. Like Masato had

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said, she had a bad feeling about this… but, really, she knew it was already too late.

The three of them slowly backed away.

“D-Don’t come any closer!” Aki suddenly yelled from behind Miharu. Her voice trembled, most likely from fear.

She glared at the men threateningly, but it was like staring down the barrel of a gun.

One of the approaching men burst into cackles at the sight of Aki’s bluff. Then, the leader suddenly drew his sword from the sheath at his waist. No matter how they looked at it, that gleam and thickness of the blade couldn’t have been a fake.

“***’* ****!” The leader-like man suddenly yelled at Miharu, Aki, and Masato.

Aki gave a small shriek. “Eek!”

Masato flinched, too. A bad feeling gnawed away at Miharu bit by bit, paralyzing her legs. It was as though someone had a fist clenched around her heart.

“L-Let’s run! Quickly!” Masato said.

“Y-Yeah!” Aki nodded vigorously.

“Don’t run, you two!” Miharu returned to her senses with a gasp and grabbed Aki’s and Masato’s hands in a fluster.

The men had weapons and were on horseback; she highly doubted they would be able to run from people like that, and running might urge them to kill instead.

More importantly, the air around the men felt abnormal.

“Eh? Ah, but…” Aki tried to say something, but trailed off.

“Don’t run. You don’t know what they’ll do, so obey them quietly. Please?” Miharu muttered, raising their grasped hands to appeal her willingness to go along without resistance. Both of her hands were trembling with fear.

“****.” The leader snorted mockingly at Miharu and the others’ lack of resistance, then gave some kind of order to the other two men from horseback. The two men suddenly moved to obey him, tying Aki and Masato’s hands with rope.

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They collected the schoolbags the two of them carried, and brought the two children over to the horses, attaching the ropes to the saddles.

Aki and Masato were upset, but quietly obeyed them as Miharu had told them to. The two of them anxiously watched Miharu, who was the only one left behind.

Then, one man stood by Aki and Masato to watch them as the other man approached Miharu. The man looked at her with perverted eyes and let out a jovial whistle, then reached for Miharu's body with a lecherous movement, when —

"****! *** ****, *** ****!" The leader yelled angrily, making the man retract his hand in a hurry. With a click of his tongue, he snatched Miharu's schoolbag and tied her hands in an impersonal manner.

Miharu froze as her body shook with an indescribable fear. The thudding in her heart didn't cease, but when she made eye contact with a worried Aki and Masato, she forced a smile onto her face. Then, Miharu was dragged to the horses and tied to the saddle just like Aki and Masato.

...*Was this the right choice?* Miharu thought as she saw the despair in Aki and Masato's expressions.

If Aki and Masato had tried to run earlier, the men might have killed one of them, and that was something she couldn't allow. While being alive didn't mean having hope, dying was most certainly the end.

"**** ***!" The leader gave a new order, and the men swiftly mounted their horses.

Miharu and the others were pulled along by the rope attached to the horse saddles and taken to the main party the men belonged to.

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Miharu and the others were taken to a run-down road that was clearly not maintained. On it were over ten wagons

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with horses that formed a line of two rows; they were surrounded by armed men who were protecting their contents.

Most of the wagons had their covers rolled up, exposing their interior platform to the open. However, the framework was made of a metal as sturdy as a jail cell, and inside were countless numbers of people in raggedy clothes.

For Miharu and the other two, who were raised in modern society, it was clear at this point that this was a different world. They could see the clear division of worlds between the imposingly armed men surrounding the wagon and the lifeless people inside the wagon. Miharu, Aki, and Masato could practically feel and see the bizarre aura hanging in the air about the group.

When the men — those who had broken off from the group to retrieve Miharu and the other two — returned, all the attention turned to them. The three were clearly wearing outfits that were out of place, drawing suspicious looks from the men. However, once the attention on their odd clothing died down, the men's gazes were gradually drawn to Miharu's appearance.

With her outfit and physical features (like her hair color, for instance), it was clear to the men that she was a foreigner. Her face was cute, with beautifully refined features, and her feminine body was truly charming — she was slender, but well-balanced. From her soft aura that managed to be both graceful and meek, her upbringing seemed to be on par with the nobility of this world.

A deceivingly gentle wind blew, ruffling both her checker-pleated skirt and glossy black hair that extended down her back. The men's eyes widened at the sight.

Miharu could keenly feel the presumptuous gazes glued to her, and she stirred uncomfortably, averting her eyes.

"****?" A well-dressed man who had appeared from nowhere addressed the men who had taken the youngsters

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with a question. His eyes landed on their bindings and narrowed sharply.

“**********. ******, ****, *******? ********.” The leader looked at the three as he said something boastfully to the well-dressed man, then showed him the schoolbags that they’d been carrying.

“**, *******.” The well-dressed man took the schoolbags and inspected them, before voicing an impressed grunt.

He looked at the three of them, and with a gloating grin, he approached them with an appraising look in his eye. He examined their clothes fixedly from point-blank range, touching each of the fabrics and widening his eyes at the quality.

Next, the man set his eyes on the group, before he moved right before Miharu. When he saw her fearful face, a sadistic smile flashed across his own. “****, ******?” he asked, but Miharu couldn’t understand his words and only tilted her head timidly. In response, the well-dressed man put on a vulgar smile.

“*******. **********.” He pointed at Miharu, and jerked his chin at the men around him to follow his order; they jumped to respond promptly.

They pulled Miharu’s bound hands by the rope, leading her away. The wagon she was led to was of better quality than the others, having a proper cover that could serve as shelter from the elements.

Unable to bear the sight of Miharu being dragged away, Aki screamed. “Miharu, wait!”

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“Aki-chan, I’ll be fine. You too, Masato-kun… Kya?!”

Miharu had turned around while being led away to smile at Aki and Masato, but the rope was violently yanked, making her lose her balance and nearly trip.

“Miharu!” Aki shouted in a panic.

“Kya?!”

“Whoa!!”

A sharp cracking sound echoed forth, making Aki and Masato shrink in on themselves. The source of the sound was from a whip, which the well-dressed man was controlling skilfully with his overweight body. He continued to swing the whip as a threat toward Aki and Masato.

“Uhh…” Aki had shriveled up completely.

“****. ** **** ***** *******.” The well-dressed man looked at Aki and Masato’s fearfulness and huffed through his nose with satisfaction, lowering his whip, then giving the men nearby an order.

The armed men stirred into action, this time dragging Aki and Masato to a wagon that was different than the one Miharu had been taken to.

With no other choice, Aki and Masato boarded the wagon; it had its platform exposed, and there were hordes of boys and girls around the age of ten gathered on board.

“M-Miharu… What should we do, Masato? What should we do…” Aki asked Masato. She stood in the wagon and grabbed the metal lattice, extremely upset.

“A-Aki, I know how you’re feeling, but it might be better to stay quiet,” Masato whispered to her, worried about their surroundings.

“What are you talking about…” Aki started to object in a sullen tone when she realized the other children on the wagon were glaring at them. She promptly shut her mouth.

There wasn’t an ounce of energy in their faces, but it was clear that they were admonishing Aki and Masato. Perhaps they wanted to tell them not to make a fuss and anger the

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guards.

“Let’s just sit down quietly for now. We don’t know what they’ll do if we cause a racket,” Masato whispered in her ear, before reading the situation and sitting down in the wagon. With that, Aki had no choice but to sit down next to Masato and hang her head in gloom.

Not long after that, the wagons that Miharu, Aki, and Masato were on departed. However, in no time at all, an uproar ensued. One of the guards at the side of the wagons pointed off the road and yelled something.

“…What?” Aki murmured, raising her head.

She nervously looked around the outside of the wagon and listened carefully. While she couldn’t understand their words, she figured some kind of disturbance had happened; at the same time, she felt a faint tinge of hope that she could use this chance to escape, despite the fact the door of the wagon was locked.

At that moment, Aki saw a figure approach from the side of the road, just next to the wagon where Miharu was. The figure looked to be a boy in his mid-teens.

“…Huh?”

The boy was dressed in an overcoat that she imagined served as travel gear in this world, but when the boy’s face entered her field of view, Aki gasped. His hair was gray, and he had an extremely refined face, but Aki’s attention wasn’t drawn to him because of that.

She had gasped because he seemed the closest to her — racially — than anyone else she had encountered in this world thus far. If she had to describe it, he looked like he was half-Asian.

The aforementioned boy came up to the wagon and started to say something to the guards. She couldn’t hear what they were saying, but the men were clearly being cautious around him.

Soon after that, the well-dressed man appeared to see

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what was going on. The boy said something, to which the well-dressed man shook his head bluntly. They seemed to be arguing about something.

The gray-haired boy then briefly cast his eyes over the convoy of wagons, and the well-dressed man looked over at the wagon Aki and Masato were on. He soon looked away again, but his eyes had met with Aki's for a second.

Did he come here to save us? Aki thought to herself hopefully, a strange uneasiness in her chest. The hope that sprouted in the midst of such a desperate situation might have only been that of pure optimism, but it was growing at an accelerating pace.

Aki was staring at the boy with a yearning gaze when, suddenly, the men around them hurriedly began to lower the cover of the exposed wagons. The cover of the wagon Aki and Masato were on was also lowered.

Why are they hiding us?

Aki felt a strong sense of suspicion. Should she take action and seek help? What if she had misread this situation? Doing so could cause her to face dire consequences later.

Would he even believe her circumstances to begin with? She didn't know.

However, this could be the turning point in their destiny — the last possible chance for them to be saved. If that was the case, she couldn't just sit around and wait.

Unable to withstand it any longer, Aki stood up with great vigor. "H-Help us!" she cried out desperately, seeking help from the boy.

The boy's gaze met Aki's eyes, and a beat later, the cover of the wagon was lowered before Aki.

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Chapter 3: Meeting You In This World

This is…

A little while before the situation with Aki seeking help unfolded, Rio had been flying close to the ground, following the faint traces of footsteps, when he discovered grass that had been heavily trodden on by numerous horses. He came to a stop before the road and immediately deduced that three people had encountered others on horseback. Next, he followed the footsteps with his gaze, then spotted a large convoy of wagons far down the road. The convoy of wagons had stopped, but were about to depart at any moment.

Several exposed wagon loads caught Rio's eyes. They had several people gathered together on them — slaves, most likely — with swarms of mercenary-like guards surrounding the wagons.

…Slave merchants, huh. This might be bad.

An unpleasant feeling settled in Rio's chest.

He aborted his flight arts and landed on the ground, before bursting into a sprint toward the wagons, using his enhanced physical abilities. However, he couldn't just attack them straight away simply because of an unpleasant feeling he had, so he decreased his speed once he had somewhat closed the distance between them. That was when one of the guards noticed Rio.

"Hey, someone's approaching from the side of the road!" A guard yelled loudly when he noticed Rio, stirring the caution of those around him. Several of the guards immediately drew their weapons and took on a formation to

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protect the wagons.

“Stop right there!” One of the guards yelled.

Rio decided to demonstrate that he had no hostile intentions, for now. “I’m searching for some people. Three of them. They came from the same direction I did just now.” He explained his intentions without drawing his weapon, staying exactly where he was, as ordered.

The air around the mercenaries changed slightly. They looked at each other, before they all turned to look at a man who was probably the highest-ranked one amongst them.

“...Someone call the boss and the captain over here. Quickly.” The man who was turned to — the leader-like man that Miharu, Masato, and Aki had encountered — said with irritation. Less than half a minute later, a well-dressed man appeared, accompanied by another bulky guard.

“Hmm. So, you’re the one who appeared out of nowhere. What do you want?” he asked unhappily, looking over Rio’s cloaked figure.

“...Forgive me for my rudeness. My name is Hans — you may have heard from your bodyguards already, but I am in search of some individuals. Three people should have appeared from the side of the road a short while ago... Have you seen them?” Rio asked, purposefully choosing to take on a courteous tone toward the haughty man.

However, it was clear that his tone was only for show, as he had given him a fake name he had made up on a whim in case things took a turn for the worst.

“Oh? And here I was, thinking you were but a mere hoodlum...” The well-dressed man muttered, narrowing his eyes.

“No clue. Unfortunately, we’re in a rush. If you’re done here, then leave,” he said with a curt shake of his head.

He had considered the possibility that he was talking to a noble based on Rio’s educated form of speech, but he ultimately decided to feign ignorance.

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“I would, but I found the footprints of several people in the grasslands a small distance away from the road. There were signs that the grass had been trampled by horses — fairly recently, too,” Rio said with a troubled smile.

“…Are you accusing us of kidnapping those people?” The well-dressed man asked Rio with an emotionless look.

“Oh, no. Of course not. I was simply hoping you would drop the pretenses and open yourself up to discussion if they really were in your care.” Rio shook his head, wearing a poker face as he selected his words carefully. He had already given them the idea that he was fairly confident, so he tried to make it seem as though he was willing to settle things peacefully by making a roundabout offer to ignore any shady business that they were involved in.

At the same time, he made a show of looking over the wagons that stood behind the man. Unfortunately, there were large numbers of slaves on every wagon; he didn’t know what the people he was searching for looked like to begin with, so all he could do was pass his eyes over each and every one.

“…I’d like to ask you to refrain from staring at my precious cargo so intently. There are many slaves who start feeling a false sense of hope from interacting with outsiders,” the well-dressed man said, glancing at the wagons behind him. He shot the large guard standing next to him a look that said to lower the covers on the wagons. At that, the bulky man and several of his subordinates began to promptly move about.

“*H-Help us!*” The voice of a young girl echoed from one of the wagons — it was Aki. Nearly everyone present had no idea what Aki had said and what the words meant. Almost everyone, except…

Help… us? Is that… Japanese?

Rio had heard it and understood it. A voice seeking help… But he hesitated for a moment, wondering if he had

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mistakenly heard wrong. After all, those words shouldn't have existed in this world.

However, when he turned his gaze toward the wagon that the voice came from, he became certain that he hadn't misheard.

There, inside the wagon, stood Aki with her East Asian facial characteristics.

"Tch. Cover the cargo already."

While Rio stood bewildered, the well-dressed man clicked his tongue and quietly ordered his guards to hide the contents of the wagons. He had run out of patience.

Eventually, the covers of the wagons were fully lowered over the interior platforms.

"Now look at what you've done. The slaves are making a fuss because of you," the well-dressed man said, still trying to feign ignorance. On top of that, his words were blunt in order to place the blame on Rio.

"...Please, hold on a moment. The girl who called out just now was one of the people I'm searching for. She was asking for help... Could you explain what's going on here?" Rio asked in a composed tone after calming down and returning to his senses. He wasn't going to back down, either.

The well-dressed man's expressions twisted in displeasure. "What a bother. Enough already. Kill him," he ordered the bulky guard next to him in irritation.

"You heard the boss, people! We're going with the simplest and easiest way of silencing someone. Form up!"

With a grin, the guard stirred up the men surrounding them. The mercenaries got in formation gleefully and enclosed Rio in an instant.

Their movements were a fine show of leadership — the skill of a mercenary group varied dramatically depending on the abilities of their commander, but all the mercenaries here seemed to be quite experienced in group combat. "You've mistaken foolishness for bravery, as there's a time

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and place for this kind of thing. This isn't it. Any last words? If you beg for your life and agree to become a slave, then I may be willing to spare you. You do have a nice face, after all… Any interest in selling your body?" The well-dressed man asked in triumphant arrogance, obviously feeling assured in his overwhelmingly advantageous position.

"…How repulsive. You should have just handed over the people you kidnapped without a fuss while you could. However, if this is what you want, I won't hold back, either," Rio said in a calm but deadly tone, shaking his head in annoyance.

The man reacted to the bloodlust directed toward him. "E-Enough. Kill him!" he ordered in a high-pitched voice.

"Get him!" The bulky commander of the mercenary squad ordered the soldiers surrounding Rio.

The mercenaries thrust their spears at Rio from every direction as they protected themselves with their shields, but Rio gracefully leaped into the air and out of the circle of attack with ease.

"Wha…?!" The mercenaries were taken aback in spite of themselves, staring after Rio dumbfoundedly as he cleared their heads with a light jump.

"Eek?!" Rio pulled the dagger hidden under his overcoat out while mid-air, equipped it in his left hand, then stabbed at the legs of the mercenaries nearby without hesitation as soon as he landed. The men who had been stabbed let out a scream.

Will they lose their fighting edge, now? Rio thought. Then, suddenly —

"*Photon Projectilis*!" The commander of the mercenary squad fired offensive magic toward Rio. A magic circle floated before the left hand he had held up toward Rio, his magic essence turning into high-speed bullets of light energy that shot forth in rapid succession.

Rio dashed to the side and evaded the attack.

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...He's awfully calm. Worthy of being the leader to all these mercenaries, I suppose. Guess it wouldn't be that easy, Rio thought tiredly as he accelerated.

"Our opponent is using physical ability enhancement! Keep him moving and strike when he's fatigued! Get into a defensive formation!"

The commander calmly called out directions as he relentlessly fired his light bullets at Rio. With that, the other mercenaries regained their composure, too.

The mercenaries got into a close formation, protecting the well-dressed man and the commander as he fired his offensive magic. Then, they lowered their bodies with their shields fortified in a circle so that the commander's trajectory was unobstructed.

Rio had been avoiding the bullets by darting freely through the wide field next to the road, but when he saw the sight of the mercenaries, he frowned in irritation and charged toward the wall of shields head-on.

"The fool lost his patience. Ready the spears!" A bloodthirsty grin made its way across the commander's face.

While the lethality of Photon Projectilis was low, it had enough force to severely wound a regular human. The magic also allowed for the ability to continuously produce rapid-fire bullets at will once activated. Its accuracy was low against opponents moving from left to right, but that changed dramatically when the opponent approached directly from the front. To charge straight for the defensive formation of shields was the height of foolishness.

The light bullets fired from the commander were closing in on Rio.

"Wha?!" For the briefest moment, the image of Rio's form in the mercenaries' vision blurred. The rush of light bullets pierced through empty space, or so they had thought.

"...Huh?"

Before they realized it, Rio had traveled around the

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mercenaries and drawn his sword, holding it aloft sideways. The sword glowed, then released an explosive blast of wind.

“Gah?!” When Rio swung his sword, the shield-wielding mercenaries were cleanly blown away into the distance. With the wall protecting him gone, the commander took in a breath and moved to draw his sword reflexively.

However, he was already too late.

Rio closed in on him instantly, then moved his sword almost in slow motion as he stabbed the commander precisely through the solar plexus.

“Tch?!”

The commander’s eyes widened in shock, his expression showing he didn’t understand what had happened at all. When Rio withdrew his sword and slowly stepped back, the commander reached down to slowly touch the wounded area. Seeing that his hands were dyed red, the commander realized his imminent death.

With that, he feebly collapsed to the ground.

Rio tightened his grip around his bloodied sword shamefully before immediately turning his gaze to the well-dressed man, who stood frozen and in a daze.

“Ah…?!” The man let out a soundless shriek when his eyes met Rio’s. He instinctively tried to back away, but lost his balance in his rush and fell on his backside.

Rio thrust his bloodstained blade at the man and looked down. “Release the children you kidnapped,” he ordered in a cold voice.

The man let out a pathetic sound. “Eek!”

“The others won’t move unless you order them to, right? Hurry up,” Rio said, sighing in irritation.

“R-Release them now! Quickly!” the man yelled in a fluster, and the frozen mercenary guards jumped into action.

In that time, Rio wiped the blade of his sword and fastened it to his belt unsheathed. Then, he grabbed the well-dressed man by the neck and roughly dragged the

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corpse of the commander to the side of the road with his other hand.

"Eek! W-Why me?! What are you going to do?!" he wailed as he looked at the body of the commander with a paled expression.

"This guy's dead body was just in the way. And you're a hostage," Rio said, lightly flinging the corpse of the commander into the grass; now the body could no longer be seen from the road. Grabbing his sword in his newly freed right hand, Rio and the man then returned to the road.

The mercenaries were silently gathered at the road, but they fearfully retreated when Rio approached. They were aware from the previous battle that the difference in their abilities was too great, and now, their commander was dead and their client taken as a hostage. They had completely lost the will to fight.

Aki and Masato had just been safely released from the wagon and were standing a small distance away from the mercenaries. Rio approached the two and spoke to them awkwardly in Japanese.

"*...Are you two the only ones that are safe?*"

"*Y-You can understand us?!*" Aki asked, clinging to his words.

"*I can, but... I'll leave the details for later. I thought there was one more of you. Was I mistaken?*" Rio asked hesitantly.

Aki nodded with vigor. "*T-There is! She was taken to another wagon!*"

Rio looked down at the well-dressed man he had grabbed with his left hand. "I don't see the last person. Which wagon is she in?" he asked, casually showing the sword held in his right hand.

"T-The second to last wagon on the right side! She's on that one!"

"...You haven't done anything to her, have you?"

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“I-I haven’t! I haven’t done anything!” he replied frantically to Rio’s questions.

“I’m going to check. You’re coming with me,” Rio said, dragging the well-dressed man with him.

“*I’m going to save your friend. Will you follow me?*” he called out to Aki and Masato.

The two of them looked down at the completely terrified slave merchant with something like pity before hesitantly nodding. “*Y-Yes!*”

Once they arrived at the wagon where Miharu was, Rio turned to the slave merchant. “It seems to be locked.”

The door to the platform of this wagon was far more securely locked than the others.

“I-I have custody of the key to this wagon.”

“Then open it already,” Rio ordered, releasing the slave merchant from his grip around the neck.

The man stood up in a fluster and tried to unlock the wagon door with his trembling hands; after fumbling for a bit, the door to the wagon’s interior platform was finally unlocked.

“Don’t try anything clever,” Rio warned him with a sharp look before opening the unlocked door. A dark and gloomy air permeated the interior.

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With a dull, grinding creak, the door to the interior of the wagon opened. Light from outside filtered through to the interior of the covered platform, replacing the stale body odor with fresh air.

Miharu looked up at the opened door worriedly… But it wasn’t just her. The wagon was packed full of beautiful young women whose gazes were hesitantly drawn toward the door, when a boy with an androgynous face appeared. They all stared at Rio.

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When he felt the gazes of all the girls locked on him at the same time, he began to look around the platform somewhat uncomfortably. Like everyone else, Miharu was also observing Rio's face.

Is he looking for someone… Huh?! Miharu flinched when their eyes met.

As Rio looked at her, engrossed, Miharu stared back in a daze. She felt like she was being sucked into his eyes. The two of them continued to watch each other in silence; Rio remained so still, it was almost like time had stopped. The same could be said about Miharu, too.

"…" Rio muttered something Miharu couldn't make out, his eyes watery and face twisting as though he was about to cry as he looked at her. Then, for some reason, Miharu felt like she wanted to cry, too.

Even though she was meeting him for the first time, there was a sense of nostalgia that couldn't be described rising within her chest.

After some time, Rio's expression changed to one that looked rather guilty. He sheathed the sword in his right hand as though to hide it, before taking a hesitant step onto the platform. He approached Miharu nervously. "*I've come… to save you,*" Rio said gently to Miharu with an awkward smile.

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Rio slowly offered his hand out to Miharu, who sat on the floor of the platform.

"*T-Thank you very much.*" Miharu's eyes widened in awe before she timidly took Rio's hand while watching his expression. He grasped her hand with reservation.

He noted how soft her hand was; unlike his rugged hands covered in sword blisters, her hand was pale, delicate, and fair. A vast difference to the hands that had just killed a

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man.

Ayase Miharu… It really is Mii-chan. Why is she here in this world? Rio's face almost twisted with the indescribable emotions within him. Unable to look at Miharu directly, he avoided her gaze, his expression laden with guilt.

He had always wanted to see her again — yet now that she was here before him, he felt absolutely terrified. He had become a different person than Amakawa Haruto. He could no longer return to his former self, because he felt like he had been stained with sin.

It was true — Rio had already killed someone with his own hands, and he had set off from the Yagumo region carrying an intensely burning desire for vengeance.

He let go of Miharu's hand. "*Your two acquaintances are waiting outside. Let's go,*" he said, turning on his heel.

"*U-Umm… What about them?*" Miharu asked him timidly as she watched the girls around her stare with envy. Rio shook his head with a troubled expression.

"*While you and your friends were kidnapped, these girls are most likely here after going through the proper legal procedures for a slave trade. If I take them along with me, I'll become a criminal.*"

Slaves were people without rights. By law, they were treated as objects. That was why stealing them was considered theft, carrying out a scam for them was fraud, and snatching them was robbery or extortion.

"*T-That can't be…*" Miharu looked around at the girls in a daze.

"*I'm sorry. I can't do anything…*" Rio's expression darkened apologetically.

"*N-No! It's not your fault! I'm the one who should be sorry!*" Miharu regretted her own foolishness keenly, and her own expression turned to one of embarrassment.

"*Let's go.*" Out of consideration for Miharu, Rio held her hand as he urged her to move. She allowed herself to be led

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out of the wagon.

"*There's a bit of a step to the ground, so watch your feet.*" Rio stepped out of the wagon before Miharu, then moved to help her down.

"*O-Okay. Thank you very much.*" Miharu timidly stepped out of the wagon. Then, suddenly, Aki ran over and hugged her.

"*Miharu!*"

"*I'm so glad you two are safe.*" Miharu gently patted Aki on the back. Masato stood next to the two of them and look on bashfully.

I'm glad too, truly. So... that voice was talking about Mii-chan... right?

Rio also smiled in relief. But at the same time, he found it mysterious that the voice in the back of his head had known Miharu and the others would appear here.

That being said, there was no use wondering about that now.

Imagine if I hadn't made it in time... It gives me goosebumps just thinking about it. All because of this guy... Rio directed a quiet but murderous gaze at the slave merchant.

"Eek?!" The merchant backed away in fear.

For a moment, Rio considered taking the slave merchant's life, too, but he restrained himself — he couldn't let his impulses drive him to murder without considering the consequences. Most importantly, he didn't want Miharu and the other two to see any dead bodies, much less the sight of himself killing someone.

"*Did they steal anything from the three of you?*" Rio asked Miharu, Aki, and Masato with a sigh.

"*Umm, they took our bags...*" Miharu answered on everyone's behalf.

Rio immediately turned to the slave merchant. "Where are their belongings?" he asked.

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“T-They’re in my wagon! I’ll return them, I’ll return them right away! Just wait there!” The slave merchant responded in a flurry, then ran toward his own wagon. Less than a minute later, he returned and thrust several bags out at Rio.

“And everything is still inside, right?” Rio questioned the slave merchant in a cold voice. He passed the belongings over to the three without pause.

“O-Of course! I haven’t touched a thing! I-I’ll give you money, too, so please believe me!” The slave merchant nodded furiously, then held out a small pouch that was sagging with coins.

Rio accepted the pouch and took a peek; there was indeed a significant amount of gold coins inside. It was probably intended as some kind of compensation for what they had gone through.

“*Is there anything missing from your bags?*” Rio asked.

“*No. Everything’s here,*” Miharu, Aki, and Masato replied quickly.

“You don’t seem to be lying.”

“Yes, that’s what I said! Please believe me, I beg of you!” The slave merchant pleaded desperately.

“...All right. But if you ever try to do something to them again, I’ll find you and kill you,” Rio threatened.

“I got it, I got it!” The slave merchant nodded in fear.

With that, Rio had nothing more to say to him. “*Let’s get away from this place, first and foremost. I’ll lead you to somewhere safe,*” Rio said, starting to walk and prompting Miharu and the others to hesitantly follow him.

Once the entire group had walked out of sight, the slave merchant fell to his knees, feeling as though his soul had left his body.

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Rio and the others headed down the road toward the

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north, with Miharu, Aki, and Masato silently following him from afar.

There was no conversation between the four of them. Every now and then, Rio would turn to check on them, but he wasn't sure what to say as an awkward air fell between them. Miharu and the other two also seemed nervous, not quite understanding the reality of their situation, and remained silent in somewhat of a daze. Thus, the silence continued as they walked on with a healthy distance maintained between them.

"Pretty..." Aki suddenly murmured. Her gaze was drawn toward the west — the day was nearly over as the sunset dyed the horizon scarlet red. It was scenery that couldn't be seen in Japan.

The rest of the party naturally turned to the western sky.

"U-Umm, I'm sorry. Excuse me?" Miharu timidly spoke to Rio's back.

"Erm, what is it?" Rio flinched before awkwardly turning around.

"Thank you very much for saving us," Miharu said, finding the courage to speak up. She bowed her head at Rio. "Who knows what may have happened to us if you hadn't come."

It was a gesture that clearly conveyed the sincerity of her gratitude and her proper, educated upbringing.

Rio looked at Miharu sadly. "No, I only did what should have been done. There's a lot I want to ask you, too," he said, shaking his head uncomfortably. Miharu slowly raised her head.

"Umm, my name is Ayase Miharu. May I ask your name? Also, umm... If it's possible, we'd like to ask you some things too."

"My name? My name... Because of some circumstances, right now my name is Haruto... I don't have a family name." For a moment, Rio was shaken, and he averted his eyes in

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hesitation. However, he decided on telling them the alias he was officially operating under while moving around in the Strahl region.

Rio was a wanted criminal after formerly being falsely convicted in the Kingdom of Beltrum, so he figured it would be better to change his name. Black hair also stood out in the Strahl region, so he had changed its color with a magic artifact. That was why his hair was currently gray.

His moment of hesitation was due to the sense of resistance he felt toward calling himself “Haruto” in front of Miharu. That being said, calling himself Rio would have required a more complicated explanation.

In the end, acting so uncertain about giving his name would have seemed suspicious, so Rio resolutely called himself Haruto. Then, he turned to watch Miharu for her reaction.

“Haru…to?” Miharu blankly murmured Rio’s alias — no, Rio’s former name.

“Haruto?” Aki also showed a conflicted expression. The tone of her voice almost sounded bitter.

“Aki-chan,” Miharu said. Aki looked at her in surprise, but Miharu simply shook her head in silence.

…*Aki?* Rio’s eyes widened after hearing Aki’s name. That name was the same as Amakawa Haruto’s little sister; the one his mother had taken away when their parents divorced.

Rio examined Aki’s face. She was only four years old the last time he had seen her, and the impact of noticing Miharu first had distracted him, but she certainly did bear a resemblance. But, the most conclusive bit of information was in how Miharu had called her Aki.

“…Umm, what is it?” Aki asked Rio timidly, noticing that she was being stared at.

“Ah, no. Sorry. I was just wondering if there was something wrong with my name.” Rio stifled his unease and pasted on a smile.

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“I’m sorry. It’s nothing,” Aki apologized, seemingly ashamed.

“Hey, what do you mean you don’t have a family name, Haruto? Ah, I’m Sendo Masato. Aki’s little brother.” Masato, who had been listening quietly, introduced himself.

“Sendo, brother… Then, Aki would be Sendo Aki — is that right?” Rio asked Aki.

Masato had said he was Aki’s little brother, but their family name wasn’t Amakawa and Amakawa Haruto didn’t have a little brother that could have been this old. Since that was the case, Rio immediately assumed Masato was a child of the person his mother must have remarried to.

“Ah, yes. That’s right. Sorry, I didn’t introduce myself earlier.” Aki nodded, bowing her head at Rio.

Rio looked up at the sky in thought. “It’s fine… Masato, you asked why I don’t have a family name, right? The sun’s about to set, and we’ll be talking for a while, so let’s move somewhere else first. I’ll set up a place where we can relax. Come this way,” Rio said, moving into the grasslands next to the road.

Miharu, Aki, and Masato looked at each other before nodding and following him.

Rio continued to progress further and further into the empty grasslands, and the others gradually became uneasy following him, wondering where they could relax in a grassy field like this.

Rio looked around the darkening field curiously before giving the three a strained smile. “Around here should do,” he muttered.

The place they had arrived at had flat ground, and was a fair distance away from the road — unless someone was staring attentively from the road, it was an area that couldn’t be easily spotted.

“Wait just one moment… I’ll prepare it right now,” Rio said, before placing his hands against the ground and

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manipulating the dirt to make a stable foundation. To Miharu, Aki, and Masato watching him from the side, however, it was unclear as to just what he was doing.

"*Dissolvo*."

Rio held out his left hand equipped with the Time-Space Cache and chanted the activation spell. In the next moment, the space before his eyes distorted greatly, twisting like a vortex. Then, it was over in the next instant, leaving a huge rock house in its wake.

"W-What in the world...?" Aki muttered in utter shock. Miharu and Masato were standing there looking at the rock building in astonishment.

Rio smiled at their reactions. "It looks like a regular old rock, but the interior is a nice living space. Come this way," he said, walking over to the door with familiarity.

Miharu and the others remained where they were, staring at Rio's back and the stone house in shock. Rio invited them inside once more.

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Chapter 4: Explaining The Circumstances

Miharu, Aki, and Masato all held their breath in unison after Rio stepped into his rock house.

The sight of a spacious living and dining area brightly illuminated by magic artifacts greeted the three. In the corner of the room was a staircase that led to the second floor.

“Please, have a seat on that sofa,” Rio said, then went to the kitchen alone and prepared several drinks and wet towels. Rio’s guests sat on the sofa nervously and looked around the room in wonder.

“Here you are — you must be thirsty. There’re seconds if need be, so don’t hold back.” Rio handed them three metal mugs filled with iced tea.

“T-Thank you very much.” Miharu gratefully accepted the drink. They had been walking through the arid grasslands with only a small amount of food and water rationed between them the whole time, so having the issue of dehydration solved was a huge relief.

“Thank you, Haruto! I was really thirsty… More, please!” Masato said, having gulped down the drink before immediately requesting another with sparkling eyes.

“…Have a little restraint. Geez,” Aki muttered to Masato with an exasperated look.

“It’s fine. Seeing someone drink that enthusiastically makes it worth it. But your stomach will feel cold if you drink it too fast, so be wary of that. Or, there’s hot tea instead,” Rio said with a smile, pouring iced tea into

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Masato's mug.

"I'm sorry. My brother has no manners... Thank you very much." Aki bowed her head timidly before putting her mug to her lips. Like the others, she was thirsty, too, and her mug was soon drained.

Without a moment's delay, Rio refilled her mug; Aki blushed with embarrassment and thanked him again, this time taking her time to enjoy the flavor.

Meanwhile, Miharu was watching Aki and Masato eagerly drink their tea with a smile on her face, before bringing her own mug to her mouth.

After everyone replenished themselves and took a breather, Rio looked straight at Miharu, who sat across from him. "Can you tell me why the three of you were in a place like that?" he asked.

The three of them looked at each other before Miharu answered on the behalf of the other two. "Actually, we don't even know ourselves. We just found ourselves standing in a field with no idea as to what was going on..."

"I see. So that means you don't know where you are, right?"

"Yes, I have no idea. Umm, where exactly are we...?"

"The Strahl region in the continent of Euphelia. If I told you you were in a field near the border between the kingdoms of Galarc and Centostella... Would that ring any bells?"

"T-They're all names I've never heard of before. We're not in Japan, are we?" Miharu asked with all her remaining hope, her expression darkening with worry.

"Unfortunately not." Rio shook his head apologetically.

"T-Then where are we? Somewhere in Europe?" Aki asked impatiently.

"...I'm sure that you have witnessed all kinds of spectacles over the course of today. Do you really believe you're still on Earth?"

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“That’s… T-Then where are you saying we’ve ended up? And who are you, anyway? Why can you speak Japanese?” Aki asked, worriedly, in a rougher voice. She didn’t seem to want to face reality.

“…At the very least, it isn’t Earth. The name of the place is as I told you just now. Also, the reason why I can speak Japanese… is probably because I used to be Japanese, maybe?” Rio shrugged as he answered with a bitter smile.

“Eh…?” Aki and the others were taken aback.

…The three of them don’t know anything… about this world, or why they came to a world like this. It’s just like me, when I woke up nine years ago with my memories of my previous life. No… they’re even more clueless than I was. At least I had my memories as Rio… Rio watched Miharu, Aki, and Masato with a sorrowful expression.

“U-Umm, what does ‘used to be Japanese’ mean…?” Miharu asked Rio timidly.

“It means exactly that. Maybe if I called it my ‘previous life’ instead…? You may not believe me, but I have memories from another life… The life when I was a university student in Japan.” Rio averted his gaze uncomfortably as he answered.

“Erm…” Miharu, Aki, and Masato were at a loss for words, unsure of how to respond to that.

“At any rate, I don’t have any objective proof of formerly being Japanese, but that’s why I can speak Japanese, so I would appreciate it if you could just take that at face value. More importantly, don’t you want to know what happened to the three of you?” Rio gave a vague smile before quickly changing the subject.

“H-Hey, Haruto. Does that mean we’ve come to a fantasy RPG world? It’s a world with swords and magic, right?” Masato asked rather eagerly.

“I never played those kinds of games in my previous life, so I’m not quite sure, but I believe it’s something like that.

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But unlike a game, there's no reset button here," Rio replied with a strained smile.

"Would we have been in pretty big trouble if you hadn't come along, Haruto?" Masato asked in a cold sweat.

"...Yeah, you would've been made into slaves at that rate," Rio told them stiffly and curtly.

"N-No way... Slaves...?" Aki murmured in a daze.

A pained expression fell over Miharu's face, but her shock wasn't as great as Aki's.

"What do you mean by 'slaves'?" Masato questioned dubiously.

Aki looked at Masato in exasperation. "Y-You don't even know that?"

"I-I don't. I'm bad at language and vocabulary. Do you know what it is, Aki?" Masato asked her sullenly.

"O-Of course I do. A slave is... Uhh... Umm..." Aki tried to explain the concept of slavery, but found herself at a loss for words. While she knew the general meaning of the word, she couldn't explain it very well.

Miharu had a conflicted expression, too.

"Simply put, a slave is someone treated as an object instead of a human," Rio interrupted.

"...Treated as an object?" Masato cocked his head, not quite grasping the concept.

"Maybe you'd understand it better if I said it this way: it's the buying and selling of people, like animals. The person sold becomes the property of the person who bought them, so they have to do what they say."

"H-Hah?! Isn't that basically a pet?! And you're saying that almost happened to us? How could they do such a thing?!" Masato yelled with rage, finally understanding the meaning.

"Black hair is unusual, and you look neat and tidy. Although you can't understand the language here, it's clear you had a good upbringing... So they probably assumed you

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would sell for a fairly high price.” Rio gave his assumption in a serious tone.

Masato paused to take a breath. “…How could they do such a thing?! And the buyers, too… How horrible! What’s so great about treating people like that? We’re not dolls!” he said in a high pitched voice. For someone raised in a modern society, slavery was an evil violation of human rights.

“Well, the buyers have their own reasons for buying. Whether its fun or not aside, there are those who simply buy them because they’re a convenient way to get labor done…” Rio said, troubled.

He had already thrown away the morals he had as a modern Japanese person and accepted the necessity of a slavery system in their current society; that was why Masato’s anger toward slavery didn’t really stir him. At the same time, he hoped that his guests didn’t have the same morals as his own jaded ones.

“What’s… with that…” Unable to accept the truth, yet faintly aware that it was pointless to continue lamenting over it, Masato hung his head limply.

“…Let’s get back on topic. Have the three of you accepted the reality that you’ve come to a different world that isn’t Earth?” Rio smiled helplessly and focused his eyes on Miharu, who sat directly opposite him.

“…Yes,” Miharu nodded seriously. There were too many aspects that couldn’t be explained otherwise, and while she didn’t want to accept it, she had no other choice.

“Naturally, you want to go back to Earth… right?” Rio asked carefully.

Aki stood up eagerly. “W-We can go back?!” she asked.

“Calm down,” Rio said, silencing Aki. “My question was badly worded — I don’t know whether or not you can return, but I don’t think it should be impossible to achieve…” He shook his head apologetically.

“O-Oh. I’m sorry. I jumped the gun…” Aki apologized

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awkwardly.

“I don’t know why the three of you are here in this world. However, the location I believe you arrived at when you first came to this world had evidence that time-space sorcery was used — I was only able to notice your presence because I had detected those traces of time-space sorcery. That is why I believe the three of you were purposefully summoned into this world,” Rio explained.

“Time-space sorcery… you say?” Miharu repeated the words she was unfamiliar with in question.

“Yes. In this world, there exists a technique called sorcery. Sorcery cannot be explained by science. For example, the house I brought out in this grass field was stored through time-space sorcery.”

“So that’s what that was…”

“In order to use sorcery, a formula needs to be drawn and have essence poured into it. It’s a little hard to explain through words, so I’ll show you an example.”

As Rio explained, he picked up one of the quills that was placed on the table and began to draw a simple geometric pattern on some paper. Miharu, Aki, and Masato watched on curiously as he drew.

“This is a very basic formula. When I pour magic essence into it…” After finishing the formula several seconds later, Rio placed his hand against it and released his essence. The formula on the paper absorbed the essence, melding with mana to cause a world-altering phenomena.

Immediately afterward, a bubble of water several centimeters in diameter formed above the formula. The bubble then followed the laws of gravity and fell down, soaking the paper the formula was drawn on.

“A world-altering phenomena occurred and created water from nothing. That was elementary water sorcery, but by combining an endless number of possible formulas, you could control fire, create ice, form electricity, and all kinds of

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other phenomena.” Rio gave the minimum explanation before demonstrating it to them; they widened their eyes in shock at the sight of the soaked paper.

“W-Wow! That’s amazing, Haruto! So *this* is sorcery!” Masato was the first to snap to his senses and yell in excitement.

“Shut up — you don’t have to be so loud about it,” Aki said, expressing her disapproval at the noise from where she sat on the other side of Miharu.

“But, Aki… Did you see that just now?! Water appeared out of nowhere. This is sorcery! Sorcery!” Masato brushed off Aki’s scolding and innocently displayed how happy he was, which was quite apparent.

“It’s not as surprising compared to a house appearing in the middle of a field,” Aki said sullenly.

Miharu watched the two of them with a smile. “Right. Like Aki-chan said: this is no big deal when compared to how I made the rock house appear out of nowhere. That was time-space sorcery. I’m sure you can at least imagine how difficult it is to interfere with time and space?”

“…Yes. There’s no way anyone could do that normally.” Aki nodded with suspended disbelief.

“That understanding is pretty much the same even in this world, where sorcery is widespread. Actually, time-space sorcery is a technique that has yet to have any chance of being practically implemented. There’s a lot of variation in the types and difficulty of time-space sorcery, as well as exceptions like the one I showed you,” Rio said, emphasizing the difficulty of time-space sorcery. His goal was to make it clear how abnormal it was that they were summoned to this world in such a way.

“What do you mean by that? Everything you say is so confusing… I don’t really get it.” Masato cocked his head in confusion.

Rio simplified his words and gave a wry smile. “I believe

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the three of you were summoned to this world through time-space sorcery, but to recreate that sorcery to send you back to Earth would be almost impossible using the current state of sorcery in this world… Does that make sense?”

“I still don’t get it. Are you saying we were summoned with sorcery that no one in this world can use? Even though it’s sorcery that exists in this world?” Masato’s doubts were most justified.

“A lot of the knowledge about sorcery was lost in a war of the gods that occurred over a thousand years ago. The sorcery of that time was far more advanced than what we have right now. I believe the time-space sorcery that brought the three of you to this world was from that time,” Rio replied, feeling impressed at how direct Masato’s question was.

“A war of the gods… I see. If that’s how it is, then I can understand.” Masato seemed to be excited about something.

Aki sighed. “…You enjoy things like that, after all. I envy how simple-minded you are,” she murmured under her breath, her voice fading out toward the end. While it wouldn’t have been hard to believe all of this back on Earth, here, her brain was finally feeling tired.

Maybe we should stop here for now? The more complex stuff can be dealt with step-by-step later.

Rio realized with a wry smile that the most adaptable person in this group might just be the youngest, Masato.

“For now, that’s all I have on the reason why I think the three of you were brought to this world. With no obvious clues, we’ll have to dig further to find any evidence about how you can go back to Earth. Do you have any questions?” he asked, wrapping up their discussion.

“…Umm, actually… Just before we came to this world, we were in a group of five. Do you know if there are any traces of the other two being nearby?” Aki asked hesitantly.

“I don’t believe there was any other disrupted essence

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located in the area, but… if you were together, then the other two must have been near you, right?" Rio asked in contemplation.

"Yes. We were meeting up together after school and were just standing around and chatting."

"Did anything abnormal occur? If time-space sorcery activated, then it would have looked like the air was being distorted."

"Onii-chan… I was talking to my brother when it looked like he suddenly distorted, right before my eyes," Aki answered slowly, thinking back to her memories.

"Your brother…" For a moment, Rio's heart skipped a beat thinking she was talking about him, but immediately realized they were children from his mother's remarriage.

"Umm, I was talking to an upperclassman named Satsuki when she looked like she distorted. I may have been seeing things, but it looked like the distortion closed in around us, too," Miharu explained, hesitantly recounting what she had witnessed herself.

"…And the same happened to you, Aki?"

"Y-Yes. It was only for a second so I wasn't sure, but it was like a distortion that started from my brother grew larger and swallowed us…?" Aki tilted her head.

Rio analyzed their descriptions. *Normally, the point of distortion starts from the target of the time-space sorcery. Based on what these two have said, the sorcery was activated separately, with this Satsuki person and Aki's brother as the focus point,* he thought.

"If it's exactly as Miharu witnessed, then I believe there's a high chance that those two were also summoned into this world through time-space sorcery," Rio concluded.

Aki's expression brightened immensely. "R-Really?!"

"Probably. If anything, those two were probably the ones summoned, while the three of you were dragged along for the ride. The reason why you were separated from the other

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two may be because the two time-space sorceries interfered with each other at such a close distance and messed up your teleportation coordinates, or something," Rio replied, his expression darkening in stark contrast to Aki's.

"B-But that still means my brother is somewhere in this world, right?"

Aki sought for the answer she wanted to hear; it was clear she admired her brother a great deal. The way she pleaded was almost as though she had found a ray of hope within a situation of utter despair.

"...I can't be certain, but the possibility is most certainly there," Rio answered vaguely with a troubled look.

While he believed there was a very high chance that that was the case, as long as he didn't know what kind of time-space sorcery was used, he couldn't afford to give her a confident answer. Not to mention that it seemed as though Aki had yet to realize that just because the other two were summoned into this world didn't mean they were safe.

However, there was no need for him to agitate her concerns any further. After all, they first had to focus on solving the problems that were right in front of them.

"I know there's still so many things you don't understand yet, but for now, let's think about how you're going to survive from now on. I will help you as much as I can, so you can leave all your food and shelter needs to me for now and focus on learning the language and knowledge of this world." Rio pulled together the biggest smile he could muster.

"A-Are you sure?" Miharu asked timidly. She carefully watched Rio's face.

No matter how optimistic she tried to be, it was impossible for them to live in this world without knowing the language. In order to survive, they had to rely on Rio. Miharu had actually planned on requesting his assistance herself, but she was more than aware of how shameless the proposal to raise three strangers was, so she had been

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finding it difficult to approach the topic and bring it up.

“Yes. There is one condition I’d like you to follow, though, so as long as you abide by that…” Rio said in a light tone to avoid making them feel wary.

“A condition?”

“There’s no need to be nervous about it. It’s just that I’m a bit of a peculiar individual, with my memories of my previous life and all. You’ll see and hear a lot of absurdities about me as we live together, and I’d like you to keep all of that secret from outsiders, unless you have my permission. For example, the existence of this house. However, if it seems like your safety will be put in danger, I won’t mind if you divulge any information. What do you think?”

Miharu was rather taken aback. “E-Erm, is that all? Are you sure? You’d be looking after three people.”

All the burden would be on Rio this way, with practically nothing asked of Miharu, Aki, and Masato. The proposal was far beyond anything Miharu and the others could have hoped for, when they had no other choice than to rely on Rio. The one-sidedness of Rio’s charity made a seeping feeling of shame crawl over them.

“Correct. Do you promise to abide by my condition?”

“…Y-Yes. We swear it. I will do everything I can to return this debt one day, so please take us into your care. Thank you very much,” Miharu said with a pained expression, bowing her head low before Rio.

“P-Please.” Beside her, Aki and Masato followed her lead and lowered their heads, too.

Rio shook his head. “Then, it’s been decided. Please raise your heads. I’m sure we must all be getting hungry by now, right? Let’s leave the details for later and have some food first. I’ll prepare it now — does anyone have any requests?” he said brightly, wanting to move beyond the heavy atmosphere.

“U-Umm, I can help! I know the favorites of the other

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two, and I'm pretty good at cooking, so I'd like you to leave the cooking to me from here on out!" Miharu offered without missing a beat.

"Then, could you please?" Rio asked hesitantly.

"Yes, I'll do my best!" Miharu clenched both her fists, fired up with motivation.

"Ah, then I'll help, too!" Aki offered in a fluster.

Masato interrupted her. "S-Stop it, Aki. Didn't you turn the hamburg steak last time into ash?"

"S-Shut up! That was just a coincidence. And anyway, brother said it was delicious," Aki objected with a sullen pout.

"Yeah, no. No way that wasn't just flattery — bro was just being polite," Masato stated firmly with a grimace.

The fact that Miharu wasn't particularly jumping to Aki's defense showed that Aki's cooking really was terrible.

"Miharu and I can handle cooking for four people between the two of us, I think. I'll need to explain how to use the kitchen, too, so the two of you can go take a bath in the meantime," Rio suggested, hoping to appease the two that were noisily bickering away at each other.

"This house even has a bath?" Aki's eyes widened, impressed. She had been prepared to camp outside just a short while ago, so hearing that there was a bath made a young girl her age extremely elated.

"First, you use the magic tool... the artifact, it's called. I'll have to explain how to use the one in the bathroom first, so follow me, everyone." Thus, the party made their way to the bathroom.

"Here we are." Rio opened the door that led from the changing area into the bathing area and invited Miharu, Aki, and Masato inside.

"Excuse me," they said, hesitantly entering the bathroom.

"Wow..." Aki murmured in surprise and astonishment without thinking at the peculiar facilities.

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Rio's playful spirit as a former Japanese person caused him to choose a warm brick at the door of the changing room, giving the illusion of a hot springs entrance. The actual interior of the bathroom was installed in what undeniably mimicked the design of a hot springs.

The changing room was spacious, but the bathroom was even more so; over half the room was occupied by a washing space made of tiled stone, while the remaining area was utilized by a splendid stone bathtub that could easily fit several adults in the water at the same time.

Magical spouts that constantly supplied fresh bath water were set along the stone surface. Thanks to the magic artifacts in the middle of the stone bath, other than regular maintenance, there was no need to change the water or frequently clean the space.

The water in the stone bath was clear, and a white steam was dancing off its surface.

"You can touch the round stones set in the washing area when you're washing your hair and body. It'll absorb essence proportionate to how long you touch it, then produce water from that spout. The right stone is for the higher spout, and the left stone is for the lower spout."

Rio approached the wall of the washing area and showed them the artifacts as he spoke. At a glance, the amount of essence flowing from the three of them was fairly substantial, so they wouldn't have had a problem using it.

"C-Can I touch it?" Masato asked, brimming with curiosity.

"Sure. The water comes out pretty fast, so be careful."

With Rio's permission, Masato triumphantly reached for the round stone on the left with the formula carved. The lower water spout immediately started bubbling forth with water.

"Wow! That's amazing!" Masato exclaimed, bursting with pure excitement.

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“There are four types of soap in those metal containers over there. Starting from the right, there’s shampoo, conditioner, face wash, and body wash. The towels are on the shelf in the changing room — feel free to take one each.”

“O-Okay.” Miharu and Aki nodded timidly. They couldn’t help but feel bewildered at how substantial the bathing facilities were.

“So, that’s how you use the bath. Who wants to get in first?” Rio asked. Aki and Masato looked at each other.

“I’m going first!”

“I wanna go first!”

Their words effortlessly overlapped with each other’s.

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After an intense round of rock-paper-scissors, it was decided that Aki would bathe first. Masato agreed to explore the rest of the house in order to relieve his boredom. In the meantime, Rio and Miharu would work together to prepare dinner for everyone.

Miharu put on an apron that she borrowed from Rio over the top of her uniform, making her look very domestic and cute. Rio became nervous, which was something out of character for him.

“Okay, shall we start cooking?” he said with an uncomfortable smile. He had already explained where the cookware was placed, where the seasoning was stored, the ingredients in the refrigerator, and how to use the artifacts for fire and water. They had also decided on a Japanese menu.

“Yes. I’ll make the miso soup and chopped burdock root, as well as the steamed dish.” Miharu nodded with a carefree smile as she began to prepare the miso soup first. Her movements showed no sign of hesitation, making it clear that she was used to cooking.

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…She really is good at cooking.

As Rio prepared to boil the rice, he admired Miharu's movements, even captivated by them. Before him was a Miharu that he didn't know. It was refreshing.

"U-Umm, is there something wrong with how I'm cooking?" Miharu asked hesitantly, noticing Rio's gaze.

Rio flinched. "N-No, I'm sorry. I was just impressed with how well you cook," he replied awkwardly.

"Ahaha, thank you very much. It's all thanks to my mother. She taught me how to cook a lot of things when I was little." Miharu grinned with embarrassment, but never stopped moving her busy hands.

"Your mother… I see."

Rio — no, Amakawa Haruto within Rio — had no idea that Miharu learned to cook from her mother. She probably began learning after she became distanced from Haruto.

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“Do you cook often, Haruto?” Miharu asked.

“Yes, I do. I’m traveling alone, so it’s a bit of a hobby for me.” Rio shrugged his shoulders, Miharu smiled with some embarrassment.

“I’ve actually never eaten a man’s cooking before, so I’m looking forward to it.”

“...I don’t think you’ll find anything different about my cooking, but I’ll do my best.”

Rio was a little — no, *a lot* more motivated than usual, but he couldn’t stay elated forever, so he reigned in his emotions.

After that, the two of them worked together in a strangely harmonious way, synchronizing with each other efficiently as they cooked. They both praised each other’s skills and responded humbly, taste-testing and exchanging opinions, and overall spending a peaceful time together.

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Just as Rio and Miharu were starting to cook, Aki was sinking into the water of the stone bath; looking up at the ceiling in a daze, she thought back on the various events that occurred today.

So many surprising things happened. They came to a world that wasn’t Earth, found themselves in a disastrous situation, finally stumbled upon some strangers — only to be unable to communicate with them — and were nearly made into slaves. However, they were immediately saved by another stranger, who agreed to shelter them and thus resulted in her leisurely relaxing in a bathtub.

We really are so indebted to Haruto... Haruto... Haruto...

In the back of Aki’s mind, Haruto... Rio’s face came to mind, eventually morphing into the painful memories of someone else, and her expression changed to one that was bitter and sour.

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Hmph... Haruto's different from that guy, but he keeps coming to mind anyway.

"He" was Amakawa Haruto — the person who had been Aki's older brother.

Aki hated him — not for a logical reason, but an emotional one. Haruto and their father had chosen to abandon Aki and their mother, and Haruto was a liar that didn't keep his promises.

However, Aki loved her mother from the bottom of her heart, as her mother had raised her with great care. After the divorce, her mother should have been rife with pain, yet she showed no weakness in front of Aki and selflessly poured all her love into her daughter.

Aki's parents had divorced when she was still four years old, so she only had vague memories of those times, but she remembered living quite happily until the divorce. Now that she was looking back on it, Aki could admit it: she had really loved her family back then.

In particular, she had loved her older brother, and was extremely attached to him. She was just as attached to Miharu, the older girl living in the house next door.

Back then, both of their parents in the Amakawa house worked full time, so they were often left in the care of Miharu's family. Aki was constantly looked after by Haruto and Miharu. She was always by their side, which was why she knew better than anyone that Haruto and Miharu were very close, and really suited each other, in her opinion.

At the time, the two were so close that they often created spaces where they were the only two that existed. For Aki, however, they were her ideal older brother and sister. When the two of them were happy, Aki was happy, too. What made her the happiest of all was when the two of them doted on her.

Being spoiled by Haruto and Miharu had been a special privilege limited to only Aki, and she was the only one

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unconditionally permitted into the unique space the two of them made for each other.

Aki was the only one who was treated specially by the two of them, making her feel special in turn. It made her truly happy.

And so, Aki had begged Haruto and Miharu, that the three of them would always stay together, and the two of them swore to keep Aki by their sides even when they grew up. Haruto promised to not only protect Miharu, but Aki, too. Despite this, it was like he had changed his mind when Haruto left with the man who had once been Aki's father.

"Liar," Aki murmured involuntarily, echoing with the sound of the water bubbling from the spout.

The only one who kept their promise and kept Aki close to her was her beloved Miharu. She continued to treat Aki as her own precious little sister, even now.

Forget it... Who cares about that guy. I haven't thought about him in so long... Aki's face twisted horribly at the indescribable and complicated feelings within her. She shook her head.

Until now, there had been no mention of Haruto in her house, so Aki had never expressed her hatred for Haruto in front of her family before. The stepfather her mother remarried aside, her older stepbrother Takahisa and younger stepbrother Masato probably didn't even know Haruto's name.

However, there was one person who knew of the hatred Aki held toward Haruto — Miharu. Once, Aki had shown great anger in front of Miharu in saying that she didn't care about someone like Haruto.

Aki knew her mother had raised her singlehandedly, that her mother was secretly in so much pain about Haruto and her father, so much so that her mother cried alone late at night... Because of those things, Aki couldn't forgive them. Before she knew it, she detested them.

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That was why *it* happened, all those years ago…

One day, Miharu had mentioned Haruto while reminiscing about something, and Aki had reacted with rejection. At the time, Miharu had apologized with sadness.

“I’m sorry,” she had said. Ever since then, Miharu never brought up Haruto before Aki ever again.

Today, upon hearing Haruto’s name, she had involuntarily thought of their Haruto. When Aki had accidentally showed an odd attitude in front of Haruto and the others, Miharu had called Aki’s name as though she had seen right through her.

Ever since Aki let her anger toward Haruto be known, Miharu had continued to treat her like a little sister. However, Aki wondered what kind of feelings she had right now.

Aah, geez! I don’t even want to think about him!

The more she wanted to erase her past, the harder it was to stop the memories from flowing out once she remembered something. *Splash!* Aki writhed about the bathtub in shame.

Let’s think about something else. That’s right… Onii-chan. I should think about Onii-chan. Satsuki, too.

Aki decided to think about the older brother that wasn’t Amakawa Haruto — Sendo Takahisa, as well as the upperclassman of Miharu and Takahisa, Sumeragi Satsuki.

Sendo Takahisa was a child from Aki’s stepfather’s previous marriage, and Masato’s older brother. He was turning sixteen years old this year — the same age as Miharu. Through Aki’s connection, he was introduced to Miharu and fell in love with her at first sight, and had felt strongly for her ever since. He could be a bit unreliable at times, but he was sociable and kind, accomplished in both his studies and sports, and handsome enough to be quite popular with the girls. Only a few years had passed since her mother remarried, but Aki was already proud to call him her

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brother.

Sumeragi Satsuki was an upperclassman from Miharu and Takahisa's middle school days, and was the president of the student council they were a part of. Miharu and Takahisa had just entered high school and reunited with Satsuki at the opening ceremony before coming to this world, but Aki was acquainted with her, too.

Satsuki was the charismatic daughter of a famous company's president. Aki secretly admired her, seeing her as a perfect superhuman with no weaknesses at all.

"Onii-chan, Satsuki... I hope the two of them are all right," Aki muttered worriedly.

The two of them were far more reliable than herself and Masato, but when she looked back upon the events that she experienced since coming to this world, she couldn't help but feel excessively anxious. Especially when she considered the parts where her brother Takahisa was lacking.

When she thought about it calmly, it was possible they had run into a similar situation to hers. As worst case scenarios flashed through the back of her mind, uneasiness endlessly surged within her.

Nevertheless, there was nothing she could do about it. She wouldn't even be able to live in this world if it weren't for Haruto, so she couldn't pointlessly make a fuss over it for nothing. Aki had enough foresight to know that much.

"All I can do now is learn as much as I can so that I can adjust to this world as quickly as possible. Then, we'll all go home together, to where Mom and Dad are, on Earth." Aki might've been averting her eyes from the reality of the situation, but it was better than running away from it; this was what she told herself. She hadn't given up hope, at least.

...I wonder if Haruto's ever thought about returning to Earth. He said he was a university student in his previous life... Is that the thing they call "rebirth"? I guess such a thing actually exists...

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She began thinking about the guardian who would have to look out for her in the near future. There was something fleeting about him, and he had many unknown sides of himself that were surrounded in mystery, but she definitely didn't think he was a bad person. If anything, he was *too good* of a person.

His personality was calm and polite, his face was pretty and well-refined, and he was very reliable; she couldn't see any faults in him so far.

Ah... I should get up soon.

Aki's head began to spin as she realized she was suddenly getting dizzy. While it was partly because she had stayed in the water for too long because it felt so good, the fact she had been thinking so hard played a large part in it as well.

She stood up slowly and placed a hand against the stone surface as she supported her staggering body. Once her dizziness waned, Aki slowly headed toward the changing room, where the cool air inside felt good.

She was extremely reluctant to wear the same pair of underwear twice, but she unfortunately didn't have a change of underwear, so she endured it and put on a childish pair of shorts. She didn't have a bra for reasons related to her growth, so she wore a camisole that was just as childish as her shorts.

"Hmph... I wish I was a little more like Miharu," Aki muttered to herself as she touched her flat body; she was at the age where she admired Miharu for her slender but feminine frame.

Once she finished changing, she returned to the living room. A delicious-smelling scent was wafting throughout, and when she fearfully peered into the kitchen, she found Rio and Miharu intimately making dinner together.

"..." Aki tried to call out to the two of them, but for some reason, her words wouldn't come out. She felt a strange sense of déjà vu as she watched the two of them in a daze,

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but she shook her head from left to right and brushed it off.

"You're done, Aki? Were you able to unwind a little?" Rio noticed Aki and called out to her in a friendly voice.

"Ah, yes. It was a very nice bath. Thank you for letting me use it first." Aki bowed her head hesitantly.

"I'm glad to hear that. Can you go tell Masato that it's his turn to get in? He's probably off exploring some part of the house."

"E-Exploring… I understand." Aki nodded in exasperation at Masato's childishness.

"Also, there are cold drinks in that box over there that you can take as you wish. The glasses are in that shelf over there, so help yourself to whatever you want."

"T-Thank you very much. You're so considerate of everything…" Aki bowed her head — Rio really left nothing to be desired.

Afterward, Aki found Masato and told him to go take a bath, then sat down on the sofa in the living room to drink her iced tea.

It sure smells nice.

As she enjoyed the tropical scent of the iced tea and cool sensation of the metal mug, Aki absentmindedly watched what was going on in the kitchen. There, Rio and Miharu were chatting about something as they made the food.

It was a space where only the two of them existed, and for some reason, it felt difficult to intrude on.

What is this I'm feeling…

Aki had a strange sense of déjà vu once again, but she couldn't pinpoint the reason why, and was overcome with an indescribable feeling of vexation. Watching the two act intimately made her heart sting with pain.

Aki didn't know that the person who broke his promise — the person who she hated illogically from the depths of her heart — was the same person who had saved her from her crisis earlier. She didn't know what Rio was feeling right

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now, as he lived in this moment with his memories of the life he led as Amakawa Haruto, after the current life he had been through.

Not only Aki, but everyone else in this house, too. No one knew.

Fate was a cruel mistress.

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Masato finished his bath just as dinner was finished being prepared.

“Dinner’s ready. Come over here, you two.”

Rio invited Aki and Masato over to the dining table. The table was lined with rice and colorful side dishes like miso soup, karaage, steamed vegetables, chopped burdock root, boiled greens in soy sauce, and salad.

“...Japanese style?” Aki froze at the sight of the dishes on the table. She never imagined she’d be able to eat a Japanese meal in a world that wasn’t Earth.

“Whoa, that looks delicious!” Masato was the polar opposite of Aki, eyes sparkling with no doubts in his mind at all.

“Let’s dig in. Sit wherever you like,” Rio prompted. Everyone made their way to their respective seats of preference. As a result, Rio sat next to Miharu and Masato sat next to Aki, the four of them facing each other across the table.

“Thank you for the meal,” they all said together spontaneously, before beginning to eat.

“Yum! Did you make this, Miharu?” Masato reached for the karaage without hesitation. The steaming-hot fried chicken burst open and released the juices of the meat in his mouth, making Masato beam with a broad smile.

Miharu shook her head. “Nope, Haruto was the one who made it.”

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“Wow, Haruto’s amazing. These steamed veggies are delicious, too,” Masato hummed in admiration.

“Miharu made the steamed vegetables. Even though you didn’t have much time to make it, the flavor soaked in perfectly. It’s very delicious,” Rio praised. It was his first time eating Miharu’s homemade cooking ever, so Rio had reached for her dish first without hesitation.

“Thank you very much.” Miharu grinned with embarrassment.

The peaceful atmosphere remained throughout the whole meal.

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Aki and Masato must have been mentally exhausted, as they were immediately overcome with sleepiness once they finished their meals and were able to relax. Rio had been cleaning up the plates with Miharu, but stopped to lead the two to their bedrooms and put them to bed.

Afterward, he immediately returned to finish cleaning. After convincing a reluctant Miharu that he didn’t mind bathing last, he sat down on the sofa in the now-quiet living room.

Sipping at his hot tea, Rio sighed and vacantly reviewed the events that happened that day.

It sure is quiet… When it’s this quiet, it almost feels like everything that happened today was just a dream.

It really *was* just like a dream — the girl he loved and the little sister he was separated from in his previous life had appeared before him once again. However, it was by no means a dream — Rio had definitely met them in this world; especially Miharu, whom he had wanted to see again more than anything. Even Aki, Haruto’s little sister, was here.

In the bathroom, beyond the door to the changing room, was the girl he loved so much, taking a bath, alone.

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Do they… trust me? Or are they simply just unguarded? Rio smiled wryly.

Captured by a man whose language they didn't understand, they had nearly been made into slaves.

While Rio had no intention of assaulting Miharu, she had no way of knowing that for sure. She showed no outward signs of wariness toward Rio, but perhaps she was feeling uneasy on the inside.

Either way, they've been thrown into a completely unknown world, out of the blue. I wouldn't be surprised if the stress has left any of them feeling mentally unstable… I'll have to prepare an environment where they can relax, to ease the burden on their minds…

A sorrowful expression appeared on Rio's face, and he covered it with his right hand in torment. The memories of his past life suddenly resurfaced.

…I wonder if I should tell them the truth… That I have Amakawa Haruto's memories, Rio pondered to himself.

While it was clear as day that telling them would only cause confusion, Rio wondered if he even wanted to do so to begin with.

Amakawa Haruto was dead, after all — that was why Rio had cultivated a sense of finality with his previous self, despite feeling a strong and lingering attachment of his love for Miharu. That is… he was *almost* able to let Haruto go, until Miharu appeared before him — in the same form as the last time Haruto had seen her.

Honestly, there was no denying that he had nearly succumbed to his inclinations, that perhaps the idle youth he had spent as Amakawa Haruto could be done all over again.

There was a part of him that felt happiness in his reunion with Miharu, looking forward to spending time together even for a short while.

However, it was suffocating at the same time, because Rio considered himself to be a person that could never turn

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back. He *couldn't* turn back.

He had said goodbye to his weakened self, the one that kept running away from a painful reality, in his parents' homeland. He had decided that he would get his own hands dirty, if necessary, and search for someone that might not even be alive anymore. If he was alive, he'd kill him.

Rio had changed. Amakawa Haruto's naivety was gone — as a matter of fact, he didn't even know if he really was Amakawa Haruto anymore. The fact that he had vague memories in his mind was the only proof he had that he still was Haruto.

Today, he had killed someone for the first time in his life. Even at that very moment, with the sensation of killing someone and the warmth of their body still lingering on him, he felt no particular sense of guilt — most likely because the man he had killed deserved it.

At this point, what could he reveal about himself to his three guests? Would he tell Miharu that he had the memories of Amakawa Haruto, then confess his undying love to her?

What if Miharu had someone she loved, and therefore rejected him? Or, even worse — it was possible she might jump to her own conclusions, considering the current situation they had been placed in.

It's no good. Even if I told them now, Mii-cha... No, Miharu and the others would only be distraught. I only just decided not to place a burden on them anymore, and yet it took me so long to realize what should have been obvious. I guess I still haven't regained my composure yet... Rio sighed shamefully.

He had no idea why the Miharu that disappeared years before Amakawa Haruto died had appeared in this world as a high school student; he was rather bewildered by it, actually. But he knew what his priority needed to be, for now and for the future: he had to protect Miharu, Aki, and

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Masato. That much was certain.

I'll need to teach them the language and the customs… It looks like I'll be constantly with them for a while. My trip to see Professor Celia will have to be put off until later. Rio decided to sit back and observe the situation for a while.

Just then, the sound of the door to the changing room opening echoed in the living room. Rio directed his gaze to the changing room to see Miharu, fresh from her bath.

Miharu closed the door politely before looking around the living room. She was still in her school uniform, but looked strangely attractive after having just finished her bath.

When Miharu laid her eyes on Rio sitting on the sofa, she approached him with brisk footsteps and bowed her head. "Ah, Haruto. That was a great bath… Thank you for letting me use it first."

Miharu's long black hair, so glossy that it shone like varnish, swayed. It tickled Rio's nostrils with the scent of soap. Rio felt his heart leap in his chest, then shook his head as though dismissing it as a figment of his imagination. "Don't worry about it. Do you have a moment to talk right now?"

"Yes. I wanted to talk to you too…" Miharu nodded hesitantly.

"Here you go, then." Rio poured ice tea into an empty mug and offered it to Miharu.

Miharu was feeling thirsty after her bath, so she brought the mug to her mouth softly and smiled happily. "Thank you… It's delicious."

Rio immediately refilled Miharu's mug with more ice tea. "Would you like to go shopping tomorrow?" he asked.

"Shopping… you say?" Miharu cocked her head, her expression blank.

"Yes. I thought we could pick up some necessities for your everyday needs… and… Well, you can't stay in your uniform forever, so…" Rio said, seemingly reluctant about bringing it

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up.

“Yes, you’re right,” Miharu said, nodding uncomfortably. Then, her expression shifted, and she gasped. “Ah… W-Was it weird to wear this again after all?! U-Umm, do I stink of sweat or something?” she asked in embarrassment.

Now that she was able to reflect on it, she had worn this outfit while she had prepared dinner and subsequently ate. She had also walked around endlessly in this uniform throughout the day; fearing that the smell of her sweat had soaked through, she sniffed her uniform in a panic to check.

Rio shook his head in shock. “N-No, not at all! You smell really nice! I could breathe in your scent forever.” In his rush to deny her statement, he spoke in a way that could have been taken the wrong way.

“Huh…? Ah… Umm, t-thank you… very much?” Miharu tilted her head; she was rather taken aback. She seemed to interpret the meaning of his words in a positive way, at least.

Rio belatedly realized he had made a remark that could be misunderstood and corrected himself in a hurry. “Ah, I-I didn’t mean it in a weird way! I just meant that it wasn’t a bad smell. I’m sorry!” he said, and bowed his head.

“I-It’s okay, I understand. I-I’m sorry, too.” Miharu bowed her head thankfully in return.

The air between them grew awkward, and for a while, their expressions were of an embarrassed sort. They averted their gazes, looking apologetic.

After the awkward silence between them continued for a few more seconds…

“…And so, I was thinking it’d be a bit difficult to move around with all of us, so would it be okay for you to shop on the behalf of the other two tomorrow? Although it would mean that Aki and Masato have to stay back here alone…” Rio said in a slightly high-pitched voice, returning to their derailed conversation.

“Y-Yes. It’ll be okay.” Miharu nodded willingly. She knew

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that if the three of them had followed Rio into the city, they would only be a burden with their lack of understanding of the language.

“Then we’ll leave sometime in the morning after breakfast, so please write down a list of the things you need. There’s no need to worry about money, so write down everything you can think of,” Rio said, trying to encourage Miharu to show no restraint in what she wanted.

However, Miharu’s expression clouded apologetically. “Umm… We don’t have anything that would be worth any money, but I swear… One day I will repay you for looking after us like this. Thank you so much. If you ever have any housework or chores you need me to do, just say the word,” she said, bowing her head deeply at Rio.

“No, there’s no need for you to repay me in that way…” Rio scratched at his head, his expression troubled. If he put himself in Miharu’s shoes, he could understand her feelings, but just thinking about it left him feeling conflicted.

“I cannot allow that.” Miharu shook her head resolutely. She seemed to have quite the upright and earnest personality.

“…All right. Then, you can do some of the housework around here, and we’ll call it even between us with that. I will also pay you an allowance for your work.” Rio nodded and smiled faintly.

“Thank you very much. I’ll work hard.” Miharu’s expression continued to remain apologetic.

“Yes, please do. Also, there was something that I had to give you, Miharu. This…” Rio said, taking out the small pouch tightly packed with gold coins.

“Umm… What’s this?” Miharu asked hesitantly, peeking at the glint of gold from the opening of the pouch.

“The compensation money received from the slave merchant that tried to kidnap you and the others.”

“These are gold coins, right? It looks very valuable…”

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“Well, to an extent. But, he had nearly ruined your entire lives. This is in no way too high of a price to be considered compensation money. You might not be too happy to accept this money, but please save it in case you need it as backup funds one day,” Rio said slowly to ensure Miharu understood his point.

“…Won’t you take this money instead, Haruto? We were the ones rescued by you, so I couldn’t possibly accept it,” Miharu declared after a pause of consideration, showing no sign of regret in front of such a huge amount of money.

“No, no. This is compensation money, so it has to go to the victims that suffered the crime. That’s how it is.” Rio shook his head, slightly taken aback.

“But we’ve only ever been on the receiving end of your kindness, and won’t have any way to use the money for a while… I would be much happier if you would accept this instead, Haruto,” Miharu emphasized. She chose to stick to her guns rather than receive what was being offered to her. Her stubborn will was clearly obvious.

“…Then we can use this money tomorrow for shopping and buying the living necessities that you’ll need in the near future.” Rio had originally intended to loan them the finances they needed, but he figured he could make a compromise instead.

“But then wouldn’t that end up being money used on us anyway…?”

“And that’s how it should be, since this was the compensation money that was meant for you,” Rio stated clearly.

“Is it really okay?” Miharu asked.

“It’s really okay,” Rio said a bit lightheartedly.

Miharu stared in wonder. “Okay. Thank you very much, Haruto.” She thanked him — for the umpteenth time that day — with a giggle.

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Chapter 5: Meeting Who In This World?

The refreshing morning sun cast its rays through a small skylight in the ceiling as Rio opened his eyes a bit, gradually waking up in his bed.

The custom-made bed crafted by Dominic, the elder dwarf, was big enough to fit several people on it, while still offering the greatest level of comfort possible.

Despite the unexpected turn of events that occurred yesterday, Rio had still been able to sleep soundly through the night and woke up feeling wonderfully rested.

That's right... Miharu, Aki, and Masato are here. I have to make breakfast... Rio thought sleepily, moving his hand sluggishly to grab the blankets and peel them away.

...Hm?

His hand suddenly squeezed around something soft. It definitely wasn't his blanket or bedcover, and it wasn't the mattress, either; it had a strange elasticity and springiness to it.

It fit into the palm of his hand snugly, its warmth comforting. When Rio tried to move his hand to confirm the sensation, he could feel a wonderful response in his hands.

...What is it? Rio wondered, his mind still half-asleep. Thinking it was strange, he gently tried to move his hand once more.

"Mm..."

This time, he thought he heard the seductive sigh of a woman — and with it, the sound of rustling fabric too. Rio gently removed his hand from the soft sensation and, with

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his eyes fearfully fixed on the ceiling, peeled back the covers and peeked under the blanket.

"Zz… z…"

He heard the peaceful breathing of someone sleeping next to him. Cautiously, Rio turned his head to the side.

There was an unfamiliar girl sleeping soundly next to him. She looked to be in her mid-teens, just like Rio; she was a beautiful girl with long, peach-colored hair. No, an *incredibly gorgeous* beauty with long, peach-colored hair.

However, there was a kind of transparency to her existence, almost as if she wasn't real; an evanescence that gave a mystical and artificial impression.

"Mmh…" The girl stirred restlessly underneath the covers, reaching out and grasping the sleeve of Rio's pajamas, before drawing her face closer to him. Her breath blew gently against his ear.

Rio's mind snapped awake, but he wasn't able to think.

"…" He gazed at the face of the unfamiliar girl from point-blank range, then turned his eyes back to the ceiling and relaxed, sinking heavily into the mattress once more. He closed his eyes.

Is this a dream? I must still be asleep. Yes, that must be it, Rio thought to himself, trying to convince his own mind and avoid the reality of the current situation.

No matter how soundly he was asleep, he would have awakened the minute he detected the presence of an unknown person next to him. Not to mention the fact that the intruder detection barriers around the house would have activated first. This *had* to be a dream.

Rio's thoughts churned rapidly until he came to the conclusion that it was a dream. Then, he squeezed his eyes shut tightly.

And yet, he still felt oddly awake.

After a minute or so had passed, Rio slowly opened his eyes and flipped back all of the covers in one single

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movement. There, a truly impossible sight spread before him: snow-white skin, extremely well-balanced limbs that were smooth and feminine, and two soft-looking mounds.

In other words, there was a completely naked peach-haired beauty before him.

“EEEEEEEEH?!” In his horror, Rio let out an incredulous yell. Never in either life had he ever experienced the act of waking up next to a naked woman sleeping beside him.

Woken up by Rio’s yelling, the woman sat up in the bed. With her legs folded underneath her, she stared at Rio in a daze. The series of movements she made was strangely erotic, making Rio avert his gaze without thinking.

W-Why am I sleeping with a naked girl?! Rio yelled in his head. His face was burning hot, yet his body had broken out in a cold sweat. If his eyes happened to wander even a bit, the girl’s bare body would come into his view. He tensed up.

“W-What’s the matter, Haruto?!” Miharu asked, boldly peering through the door of Rio’s bedroom.

Dominic had crafted the room to be perfectly soundproof, but Rio had chosen to leave his door open in order to hear things while asleep, which was why Rio’s shouts had reached the living room. Miharu had been trying to take the initiative after Rio accepted them into his care by getting up before anyone else and making breakfast.

“...Huh? Ah, umm, err...”

When Miharu spotted Rio and a naked girl sitting near each other on the oversized bed, she hesitated, flustered. She attempted to explain herself, but her cheeks were gradually reddening. Rio covered the girl’s body with a blanket in a hurry, but it was already too late — what she had just seen was already burned into Miharu’s mind. Unsure of what to do next, she found herself tearing up.

It was understandable — their gentle and sincere savior had brought over a naked and beautiful girl to spend the

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night while they were unawares, after all. From Rio's point of view, that was in no way the truth, but the current situation couldn't help but give off that impression.

"W-Wait, that's not it! Mii — Miharu! This is a misunderstanding…" Rio tried to explain himself in a fluster, but he was at a loss for words. Even if he wanted to deny everything, he didn't know how to explain it.

"Huh?!" The peach-haired girl tilted her head in question, watching Miharu steadily before suddenly clinging to Rio. The blanket that covered her fluttered up, making Rio's body flinch, whereas Miharu's face had also reached its peak in redness.

"I-I'm sorry! I shouldn't have opened your door without warning… I didn't see anything! B-Bye now! —Oww!" With great force, Miharu bowed her head, rotated 180 degrees, then made her immediate retreat. However, in her rush, she crashed straight into the door frame.

"A-Are you all right?!" Rio asked in a panic.

"I'm fine… Ugh… I'm sorry… forgive me. I'm so clumsy." Miharu staggered as she repeatedly bobbed her head, face flushing red in embarrassment as she retreated successfully this time.

Only Rio and the stranger were left in the room. The urge to chase after Miharu surged within Rio, but he hung his head in disappointment instead.

"…Umm, who are you? Could you explain this situation to me?" he asked, then placed a blanket over the girl. He wasn't about to leave her as she was, but he needed to sort out the situation at hand first.

"I'm the spirit contracted to Haruto," she answered in a clear and beautiful voice, cocking her head curiously.

"Spirit… I see. The contract spirit. So you're…" Rio calmed immediately at the girl's answer.

Realizing who the girl was, he observed her face and found her to have a very divine look about her. However, she

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seemed almost artificial in a way, her beauty leaving a cold and fleeting impression. Her aura was similar to Dryas's in the spirit folk village, though Dryas had a much greater range of emotions than the girl before him right now.

It made sense considering the situation, and the girl had that faint feeling of having a life force characteristic of spirits — Rio concluded that the girl in front of him really was his contract spirit.

"...There's a lot that I want to ask you. Who are you? Why are you contracted to me? You were the one who gave me the directions to save Miharu and her friends, right?"

Rio asked question after question. He had to understand who his contract spirit was, and how much she knew. He had always wanted to find out, actually. However, the girl shook her head slowly in a troubled way.

"I don't know," she replied simply.

Rio's face fell in disappointment. She had dodged his questions. "Y-You don't know...? Didn't you tell me to head southeast when I was in Amande? And you taught me how to use spirit arts, back when I was still a child... Wasn't that you?" he asked, pulling himself together.

"I don't know," the girl answered with an emotionless expression, although her voice had a hint of sadness in its tone. She quietly extended her hand and gently grabbed Rio.

"Warm," a soft murmur seemed to reach Rio's ears as she clutched his hand. However, the girl's mouth had not moved, and her expression looked rather relieved.

Rio was completely thrown off balance. "Umm, okay... Could you at least tell me your name?" he asked with a sigh.

"I don't know my name, either," the girl answered with a sad look in her eyes.

"Y-You don't know your name? Err, then, what *do* you know?" Rio questioned, bewildered.

"I will stay by Haruto's side, so I want a name," she said.

"...By my side, huh." Rio's face fell with gloom.

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The girl looked at Rio's face a little uneasily. "Can I?"

"You... can, but why me?" Rio asked in return, confused.

"I exist for Haruto's sake," the girl said plainly, showing no sign of shame. Her words were almost like a graceful and pure confession, though the girl probably had no intention of coming off that way.

Rio's eyes widened before a giggle escaped from his lips. "...Haha. Is that so?"

For some mysterious reason, he didn't feel any hesitance in accepting the girl's attitude. Was it because she was his contract spirit? He didn't know for sure, but that was what Rio assumed.

"Then, I guess... it is what it is. We'll have to think of a name for you."

For now, Rio decided to accept the girl's presence here.

The girl showed a fleeting smile as she nodded. "Yeah."

"...Speaking of names, you know my name, right?" he asked, nearly feeling captivated by that smile. Now that he was mentally calming down, he realized the girl had been calling him Haruto.

"Because Haruto is Haruto." The girl returned his question with a curious look. Perhaps it was spontaneous, but her words sounded profound.

Rio scratched his head with a troubled expression. "No... Well, yes, but that's not quite... Do you know my other name?" he asked carefully.

"I know. Rio," the girl responded without missing a beat.

"So you know that one, too. How much do you know about my past?" Rio placed a hand by his mouth in thought.

"I know everything there is to know about Haruto." The answer that came back to him was rather unexpected, leaving Rio feeling taken aback.

"Everything... Which means, umm... Everything about Amakawa Haruto, too?"

"You mean the Haruto that came before the Haruto that

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exists now?" The girl's response was rather philosophical, but it told Rio everything he wanted to know.

"...So, you know."

Rio could almost feel a headache coming on. Just as he had decided to hide his previous life from Miharu, Aki, and Masato, someone who knew of his previous life had appeared. When he thought about it, he realized that this girl and his three Japanese guests couldn't communicate with each other, so there shouldn't be any issues.

"Don't worry. I won't tell them." The girl shook her head slowly.

"That's... Right, okay. Thank you." Rio was almost about to ask something, but after a moment of hesitation, thanked her with a strained smile. It was a topic he wanted to avoid, but since she had brought it up first, it felt like he now owed her something.

He asked one last thing. "...And do you know *why* you know those things, by any chance?"

"I don't know. Because I knew before?" She shook her head, remaining as expressionless as ever as she tilted her head in question.

Rio watched her quietly as she watched him back. In the end, Rio was the first one to avert his gaze — there was no telling how long they could have stared at each other.

"...About your name. Are you sure you want me to name you? It's your name, so maybe it'd be better for you to think of one yourself," Rio sighed.

"I want a name from Haruto," the girl requested immediately.

"Erm, then... Can you give me some time to think about it?" Rio asked with a troubled look. It wasn't easy to come up with a name on the spot, and he didn't think names were something that should be decided so easily anyway.

"Okay." She nodded.

Rio had asked everything he wanted to know for now, so

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he processed the situation in his head. *For now, she doesn't seem to be a bad person. Which means… what I need to do now is…*

"I'd like to clear up the misunderstanding with Miharu right away, so could you come with me? Oh, but we'll have to get you some clothes to wear first…"

Just as he thought to go talk to Miharu about the situation, he remembered the girl was completely naked under the blanket and paused, at a loss. The sensation of what he touched earlier and the beautiful body he caught a glance of resurfaced in his mind, making him shake his head furiously.

"Clothes… Like this?" The girl murmured quietly. A flash of light escaped from beneath the blanket before she lifted the covers.

"Wah! W-Wait! …Huh?" Rio hurriedly averted his gaze from such a bold action, but the flash of a non-skin color in the corner of his eye made him glance back timidly. The girl was now wearing a simple dress.

"H-How?" Rio nearly found himself captivated by how cute she was, but his doubt won over her charm.

"I weaved it with ode and mana," the girl replied nonchalantly.

"Right, so that light just now was spirit arts… No, wait. You can do that?" Rio questioned with a tilt of his head, nodding in half-understanding, half-residual doubt. He had never heard of clothes being crafted by ode and mana before. "Well, whatever. Let's go. You… might not speak her language, but I'll explain everything, so just stay next to me." With a sigh, Rio stood up from the bed; how she had made her clothing wasn't an issue at the moment. He felt completely exhausted, despite having just woken up.

"*I can speak the language, though,*" the girl offered nonchalantly. Until now, they had been conversing in the common Strahl tongue, but the language the girl had used

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just now was Japanese.

"*So you can speak Japanese, too. Well, if you knew about my previous life, then… that makes sense?*"

"*I can speak all the languages that Haruto can speak.*"

"*…I see.*" Rio was no longer surprised, now simply accepting the explanations as they came. "*Let's get going, then. You can leave the explanation to me, but it'd be helpful if you could speak up if Miharu asks you anything.*"

"*Okay,*" she nodded, before getting up from Rio's bed.

He then opened the door to his bedroom and headed toward the living room where Miharu was most likely to be, his footsteps heavy.

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Accompanied by his new guest, Rio finally stepped into the living room. Miharu seemed to be in the kitchen; she had noticed that Rio and the girl had left his bedroom, but she continued to focus on her cooking while hiding her embarrassment. Meanwhile, it seemed as though Aki and Masato were still asleep.

"Umm, good morning, Miharu." Rio approached Miharu with determination, speaking in a voice that was louder than usual.

"G-G-Good morning, Haruto! Umm, I'm preparing breakfast right now, so… err, could you please wait a little longer?" Miharu blurted out, avoiding eye contact with Rio. Her cheeks were still stained scarlet and her panic was clearly visible.

Rio was too shaken to notice earlier, but her apron and uniformed figure were very domestic and homely. It was the epitome of sweetness, and Rio found himself enchanted before he knew it. "Umm, is it all right if we speak for a moment? It's about her," he said to Miharu with a glance at the spirit girl waiting behind him.

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“Ah, yes. W-What is it?” Miharu asked, finally looking at the girl. Her earlier impression of the girl’s naked state had been so strong that she hadn’t noticed her beautifully-refined face. Her eyes widened in surprise.

For a moment, silence fell between them.

With a deep breath, Rio opened his mouth. “I know you must be surprised by the sudden turn of events, but I’d like to start by telling you the truth. There are higher lifeforms in this world called ‘spirits,’ and she is one of those spirits…” He knew he had to explain this part properly.

“A… spirit? Her?” Miharu looked at the girl questioningly. While Miharu knew what the word “spirit” meant, she couldn’t see the girl as anything other than a human in terms of appearance. She *did* have a beauty that was almost ethereal, though.

“…Miharu.” When the girl met Miharu’s eyes, she murmured her name.

Miharu was taken aback for a moment. “Ah, yes. I’m Ayase Miharu. Err, what’s your name?” she asked.

“I don’t have a name.” The girl shook her head sadly, then looked at Miharu as though envious over the fact that Miharu had a name.

“Oh… Y-You don’t have a name?” Miharu looked over at Rio in bewilderment.

“Yes. I don’t know if it’s because she’s a spirit… but she doesn’t have a name. I barely know anything about her as well, actually.”

“Huh? Ah, umm, is that… so.” Unable to process the flow of the conversation, Miharu tilted her head in confusion.

“Yes. She contracted herself to me while I was unaware, and had been sleeping within me this entire time — until just now. I’ve never met her face-to-face, nor spoken to her before. Then, this morning, she suddenly appeared outside of me and… umm, invaded my bed. I yelled because there was an unknown girl beside me when I woke up… I-I swear I

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didn't do anything dirty to her!" Rio appealed to Miharu with everything he had, bowing his head vigorously.

"T-There's no need for you to lower your head! I think I understand what you're saying, somewhat! If anything, it was m-my fault I peeked inside your room without warning, so I'm the one who should be apologizing! I'm sorry!" Miharu apologized in return, gesturing wildly in a fluster to stop Rio.

"You... believe me?" Rio raised his head timidly and peered at Miharu's face. To be honest, he wasn't expecting her to believe him so easily, and had been prepared to be hated for being indecent.

Miharu straightened up and nodded firmly. "Y-Yes. I don't think you're the type of person to lie for no reason." She smiled bashfully.

"T-Thank you very much..." Rio sighed in relief, the strength draining out of him.

"Okay now?" The spirit girl tilted her head and asked Rio.

"Yeah. Thanks." Rio smiled happily.

"So, she can speak Japanese?" Miharu asked curiously, watching the girl's face.

"Yes. She was born and grew up as a spirit in this world, but apparently she can speak any language I can speak, so..."

"S-Spirits must be amazing... And she's really beautiful, too. Even though she doesn't look any different to us humans on the outside, there is certainly something otherworldly about her aura," Miharu said while staring at her in awe.

"Miharu is beautiful, too," the girl suddenly said.

Miharu's eyes rounded in surprise. "Huh? M-Me? That's not true," she denied.

"...No, I think you're beautiful, too, Miharu," Rio interjected hesitantly.

"Ah, oh, H-Haruto, not you too. ...Ah, t-that's right! I have to make breakfast!" Unsure of how to respond, Miharu

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blushed furiously and fled to the kitchen in a hurry.

“Oh, Haruto. Morning…” A sleepy Masato appeared in the living room, but the instant he saw the spirit girl next to Rio in his vision, he froze on the spot in shock.

“Good morning, Masato,” Rio said with a wry smile. However, Masato was still frozen on the spot, his breath taken away by the appearance of the girl.

“…”

“Oi, Masato. What are you standing around for? You’re blocking the way… Geez!” Aki was awake, now. When she grew impatient of Masato blocking her way, she squeezed past him and into the living room since he showed no signs of moving.

“Ah, good morning, Haru…to.” Aki tried to greet Rio politely when she spotted him inside the living room, but she froze just like Masato had when she saw the spirit girl next to him.

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“Good morning, Aki,” Rio greeted with a strained smile.

“G-Good morning,” Aki managed to reply hesitantly. She seemed to maintain her calm better than Masato did.

“I’d like to introduce her to the two of you, but shall we sit down first?”

Rio decided to explain the situation to Aki and Masato right away.

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Rio gave a simple explanation of what happened to Aki and Masato and introduced them to the spirit girl.

“...So that’s how it is. Masato, were you listening?” Rio asked with a droll smile. Masato had been distracted throughout the entirety of Rio’s explanation, captivated by the girl in a fluster.

“Y-Yeah. I was. She’s the spirit lady Haruto’s contracted with, right?” Masato glanced at the spirit’s face before nodding, his voice oddly high-pitched.

“Well, yes...” Rio wondered with a wry smile and a tilt of his head as to whether or not Masato would be able to live together with her.

Aki looked at Masato from where she sat beside him. “Don’t let him bother you. He always falls in love at first sight with cute and pretty girls older than him. It seems like he’s suffering from his affliction more severely this time around, but he’ll eventually get used to it, so just cut him some slack for now,” she explained to Rio with an exasperated face.

“Ahaha.”

“Wha— T-That’s not true!” Masato blushed furiously with embarrassment.

Aki shook her head without hesitation. “Liar. You were so nervous the first time you met Miharu, too. Your brother was quite an amusing sight to see, but you were even worse

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than him.”

“Wahwahwah!” Masato started yelling as though to drown out her voice.

“What are you two yelling about this early in the morning? Come on, breakfast is ready.”

Miharu appeared from the kitchen; she was carrying the completed breakfast dishes from the kitchen counter toward the dining room table.

“Sorry, Miharu. I left you to deal with breakfast alone… Let me help you carry it,” Rio said apologetically, stepping forward to help set the table.

“It’s fine. I can at least handle the housework.” Miharu shook her head with a smile.

“…Thank you very much. It looks delicious.” Rio smiled at the dishes lined on the table; she had prepared a well-balanced Japanese meal.

“I hope the taste is to your liking… Let’s all eat now. Umm, I made enough for the spirit girl, too, but will you be able to eat the food?” Miharu asked, looking at the spirit. While she looked exactly like a human, it was hard to imagine spirits eating meals like everyone else.

The girl slowly drew closer and nodded. “Yeah. I can eat.”

“Thank goodness. Let’s eat together, then. Here.” Miharu took the girl by the hand and led her to the dining table.

Rio watched the two of them with a smile. They had completely different hair colors, yet they looked like sisters for some reason, Miharu being the older one, most likely.

After that, the five of them sat in their seats and began to eat their breakfast.

“It’s kind of inconvenient not being able to call her by a name, though. Have you considered what you’re going to do about that?” Miharu asked Rio partway through the meal as she looked at the spirit girl.

“Actually, she’s requested for me to give her a name, but I’m stuck on ideas for good names. Do you have any

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suggestions, Miharu?" Rio asked her with a dry smile.

Miharu started to think with a contemplative look on her face, but couldn't come up with anything good on the spot. "Hmm. When you put it that way... it's kind of difficult. What kind of name would you like?" she asked, turning to the girl in question.

"As long as it's a name Haruto picks, anything."

The girl's answer made Miharu smile faintly. "Ahaha. You sure are loved, Haruto."

"Good for you, Haruto," Masato muttered under his breath.

"Do you have anything more specific than that? Maybe if there's something you like, you could go in that direction for ideas," Aki suggested to the spirit girl, ignoring Masato.

"The things that Haruto loves and treasures," the spirit girl answered simply.

"Ahaha, I see. If that's the case, then you should just use Haruto's name as a base for your own," Aki said with a bitter smile.

...The things that I love or treasure? Rio thought to himself, glancing at Miharu.

"...?" Noticing she was being looked at, Miharu cocked her head in question.

The first thing that came to mind was Miharu... Just how stubborn am I? With a bitter smile, Rio guiltily averted his gaze.

However, thanks to that, one name came to mind.

"How about... Aishia?"

In the ancient spirit folk tongue, "Aishia" was a word that meant "warm spring" or "beautiful spring." It may have been a bit too simplistic, but the girl's hair was the gentle peach color of cherry blossoms, so she gave off a rather strong impression of spring.

However, now that he had said it out loud, he realized "beautiful spring" was the exact same meaning as Miharu's

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name. He felt rather embarrassed by it.

“Aishia. I want that one,” the spirit girl said resolutely.

“…Umm, we could keep thinking with everyone and come up with a few options first,” Rio offered as he panicked on the inside.

“Nope. Aishia’s good.” Aishia shook her head bluntly.

She hadn’t shown many emotions or expressions since waking up, but the firm resolution that had been revealed just now made Rio widen his eyes. “Well, if you’re happy with that, then I guess that’s it?” he said, giving in with a wry smile.

“Aishia… That sounds like a pretty name,” Miharu said, murmuring the name as though testing it. “Does it have a meaning?” she asked Rio.

“Umm. It means ‘warm spring,’” he replied, feeling somewhat uncomfortable. He kept the other meaning to himself.

“…I see. You took the ‘haru’ from Haruto, right? The one that means ‘spring,’ as in the season.” Convinced, Miharu guessed at the explanation of the meaning.

“…Yes, that’s right.” Rio averted his gaze from Miharu and looked at Aishia. The girl in question should have known the meaning behind the name, but who knew how she felt about it.

“Miharu, Aki, Masato. It’s nice to meet you.” Aishia bowed her head at the three of them. Since her name had now been officially decided, she greeted them once more.

“Yeah, it’s nice to meet you. Ai-chan… Can I call you that?” Miharu asked happily.

“Yup, that’s fine.” Aishia nodded nonchalantly, but the hints of a smile could be seen on her mouth. Aki and Masato spoke up to Aishia, too.

Rio watched the four of them with a smile on his face, but there was a lot he needed to think about regarding the future.

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I don't really want to cause them any trouble, but if I can get permission, it might be better to consider bringing Aishia and everyone to the spirit folk village. I would need to head there myself first to get permission from them, but I should at least wait until the others can speak the language in broken sentences... Rio thought in the corner of his mind.

The spirit folk might know something, whether it be about Aishia or Miharu and the others. It would have taken Rio a month or so to make the return trip there alone, but with the teleport crystal he received from Ursula, he could shorten half of the trip. Even with the crystal it was still quite a trip, but it was an option worth considering.

Well, first things first: the shopping for today. There might be some things that are difficult to buy with me around, so I'll bring Aishia along as an interpreter. I'll ask her about it later.

As Rio looked at Aishia, he turned his thoughts toward the day's shopping trip.

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Chapter 6: Shopping

After he ate, Rio called Aishia to join him outside so that he could speak to her alone.

It was the perfect day to go shopping: the weather was clear, and a refreshing wind gently ruffled the grassy fields.

Rio stretched lightly and relaxed. “You can fly with spirit arts, right? Do you have an elemental specialty?” he asked.

As a spirit — the progenitor of spirit arts — Aishia would naturally know spirit arts, too. With spirit arts, a caster or spirit usually had their own specialty element. Experienced casters and high-ranked spirits could all use a certain level of every element, so Rio assumed Aishia could fly as well.

“Yup, I can fly. My specialty is the same as Haruto. I’m proficient in all of them,” Aishia confirmed quietly.

“...I see. I’ve heard that universal users are really rare before, though.”

Universal spirit arts users and spirits were few and far between. Because Rio himself was one of those exceptional users, he didn’t show that much surprise other than the slight widening of his eyes.

“That’s why I can fight, too. I can protect Haruto. I can stay beside Haruto,” Aishia suddenly said.

“Aishia...” Rio’s eyes widened further this time, murmuring Aishia’s name.

“You can lean on me whenever you need me. Just say the word, Haruto.”

Rio’s eyes widened at Aishia’s words, and he gave a soft smile. “...Thank you. I may need to leave the house in the near future. When that time comes, could I leave Miharu’s protection in your hands, Aishia? Of course, I doubt you’d

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need to do anything as long as you're all in this house."

"Okay," Aishia agreed quietly but dependably.

"Also, we're going to go shopping today. Could I ask you to accompany Miharu and act as her interpreter while we're out?"

"Yup, sure."

"...Thank you." Rio thanked Aishia with an even more peaceful smile on his lips. She was so obedient and earnest, he couldn't help but feel sorry for her.

"Is that all?" Aishia wondered, tilting her head.

"Mm, I actually wanted to try flying in the air together, but could I check your fighting capabilities instead? We won't be using any flashy spirit arts, though... Can you fight at close range?" Rio asked. Their conversation just now had piqued his curiosity about how well a humanoid spirit like Aishia could hold their own in battle.

"I can."

"Then, let's do some light sparring. We have to go shopping soon, so let's keep it short."

"All right."

"Okay. When this rock hits the floor, the match begins. Are you ready?" Rio picked up a rock, then placed 15 meters of distance between Aishia and himself.

"Yup." Aishia gave a short nod.

Once Rio confirmed her nod, he gently threw the rock upward. The rock drew a parabolic line through the air before landing on the ground.

Immediately after, Aishia disappeared.

In actuality, Aishia had moved in front of Rio in an instant. At the same time, her arm reached out to grab him by his clothes.

So fast! A throwing technique, huh? Rio's eyes opened wide in shock before his hands moved reflexively. He broke out in a cold sweat, and he evaded Aishia's hands while backstepping.

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He had underestimated her; Rio had unknowingly categorized Aishia as someone that needed to be protected. However, Aishia had blown his naivety away at a moment's notice, as though she was proving her own strength to him.

Aishia closed the gap between them with determination, launching a skillful attack. With a combination of feints, her fists and feet moved at Rio at a terrifying speed. The force behind a single hit would be enough to damage his enhanced body if it made clean contact.

However, Rio was still able to smoothly evade every attack.

There's something familiar about the way she moves… Wait, is she copying my moves?! he thought, seeing that Aishia's close-range combat techniques were consistent with his own style. While he wasn't sure of the reason, it was possible that she had learned the same techniques as him through osmosis, just like when it came to his language.

For several moments, Aishia continued to launch her attacks at Rio, before suddenly changing her attack pattern. She backed away for a moment and put distance between them, then used wind spirit arts — just like Rio — to accelerate her movement, stirring up the surroundings as she took off again.

With a deep breath, Rio mustered a large amount of ode from within himself to raise the effect of his physical enhancement and sharpen his senses even more. As Aishia closed in on him, Rio was only barely able to perceive Aishia's movements with his sharpened senses. Suddenly, Aishia thrust the palm of her hand at him, but Rio flanked her and sidestepped her outreached palm at the same time. He then aimed to trip Aishia off balance and used that momentum to lightly fling her in the direction she was moving. Aishia's eyes widened, but she gracefully flipped over in midair to deftly land on the ground, then turned to resume attacking once more.

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“W-Wait! That’s enough, Aishia! I have a good idea of your ability now!” Rio called out. Aishia froze on the spot.

“…I couldn’t land a single hit. You dodged them all,” she murmured quietly.

“Umm, well, they were all movements I knew already… So you could say I’ve been learning longer than you?” Rio replied with a wry smile. He didn’t know how much actual experience Aishia had on the battlefield; all he knew was that she was asleep for the last several years. It wouldn’t be strange for her skills to be dulled, even if she was a spirit.

“Haruto really is strong.”

“Ahaha, thank you. We shouldn’t be too late, so let’s hurry back inside the house.” Thus, Rio and Aishia went back inside.

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After his sparring match with Aishia, Rio prepared to depart for Amande.

“All right, we’ll be going now. You’ll be safe as long as you’re in this house, but we’ll try to hurry back soon anyway. Make sure you stay inside,” Rio said to Aki and Masato, who were left in charge of the house.

The house was fortified and difficult to physically break into once it was locked and secured, and it was covered by a compact version of the barrier around the spirit folk village, so most outside intruders would never even step within the range of the barrier. Unless a formidable enemy just happened to pass right by the house, it was most likely safe. The surrounding area was devoid of people and the grasslands had very few monsters, so there was a very low probability of a fierce opponent passing by.

“Yeah, we got it. Take care of Miharu, Haruto.”

“Please be careful on your trip.”

Masato and Aki spoke up as they saw them off.

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“I’ve left a lunch that can be eaten cold on the dining table for you, just make sure you heat up the miso soup. You know how to heat it, right?” Miharu asked worriedly.

“We’ll be fine. You’ve taught us plenty of times already.”

“How many times has it been, Miharu? Just go already!” They both responded to Miharu’s overprotectiveness with wry smiles.

“Let’s go, Miharu,” Rio urged.

“Okay…” Miharu agreed reluctantly. “We’ll be back soon.”

“But can you really make it back today? It looks like we’re completely surrounded by plains… Is the city actually really nearby or something?” Masato asked curiously.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t told you how we’re going. I’ll show you something interesting. Come outside for a bit, you two,” Rio said, leaving the living room to head for the front door. Aishia immediately followed him, and the other three slowly made their way over, too.

Once they left the house, a vast area of grassy plains spread before them outside.

“…It really is an amazing view,” Miharu murmured, overwhelmed by the view of the land that stretched all the way to the horizon. Now that a full day had passed, the feeling that she was in another world really cemented in as she looked out at the scenery. Aki and Masato hummed in admiration as well.

“You’re about to see something much more amazing,” Rio said with a faint smile tugging at his lips.

“Even more than this?” Miharu turned her head hesitantly, unable to imagine how that would be possible.

Instead of answering Miharu, Rio addressed Aishia who had been standing silently. “Aishia. I want to see how far you can fly, so can you show me?”

“Sure.” Aishia nodded gently. Then, her legs began to float off the ground. She continued to rise up easily, as though ignoring the force of gravity.

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“Huh? ...Huh? Wha?” Miharu and the others were taken aback, staring up at the ascending Aishia in shock. She had already risen far up into the sky, moving about freely through the air at quite a fast speed.

She said she could use all types of spirit arts, but I guess that was to be expected of a humanoid spirit. Rio watched Aishia’s figure in admiration.

In the meantime, Masato returned to his senses. “Wow! Is that sorcery too?!” he asked excitedly.

“It’s different from sorcery, but you can think of it as something similar for now. I’ll explain the particulars another time,” Rio answered simply. A proper explanation would require much more time.

Just then, Aishia descended softly toward the ground.

“Well?” she tilted her head and asked Rio in a monotonous voice after she had smoothly landed.

“It’s perfect — I have no complaints. Sorry to say this just as you landed, but shall we go now? Are you ready too, Miharu?” Rio smiled and nodded at Aishia before turning to look at Miharu.

With a flinch, she stepped forward hesitantly. “Y-Yes. Please lead the way.”

“...It might be a bit late asking this now, but are you comfortable with heights?” Rio asked carefully.

“I’m okay with them... I think.” Miharu nodded, though in a slightly nervous manner. She had never flown through the air like that before, so all she could do was make an assumption.

“I guess we’ll have to find out once we’re up there. We’ll fly slowly at first.”

“Yes, please.”

Rio called for Aishia, but when he looked around she was nowhere to be seen. “Aishia... Huh?”

He had wanted her to carry Miharu instead, since he figured it would be better than having someone of the

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opposite gender do it, but…

“If you’re looking for Aishia, she left already,” Masato said, pointing at the sky; Aishia was already quite far up. She seemed to be warming up for the flight, as she showed no signs of coming back down.

“Haha… Erm, do you mind if I’m the one that goes with you?” Rio asked Miharu nervously with a dry laugh.

Miharu nodded with curiosity. “Huh? No, I’m fine with that.” She had yet to realize what Rio was being self-conscious about.

“Umm, I’ll have to carry you…” Rio admitted with difficulty, and Miharu finally understood.

“A-Ah, I see. That’s right.” Her cheeks turned bright red with embarrassment.

“Ahaha, maybe not after all. I’ll call Aishia back and get her to carry you.” Rio laughed somewhat awkwardly and brushed it off, preparing to move upward and call Aishia back down. However, not wanting to be rude to Rio, Miharu spoke up in a fluster.

“N-No! I-It’s okay, I don’t mind!”

Rio turned back with a strained smile. “You don’t have to force yourself, you know?”

“I-It’s fine, really. I don’t mind at all, if it’s you. I trust you, so… please.” In a tumble of words, Miharu stopped Rio and bowed with embarrassment.

“…Umm… Then, excuse me.” After much contemplation, Rio decided that rejection here would be rude. He slowly approached Miharu in order to pick her up. With her acknowledgment, Rio nodded and picked her up, bridal-style.

“Umm, a-am I heavy?” Miharu asked with a bright red face.

“Not at all — you’re very light. Like a feather, as the saying goes.” Rio shook his head with a grin.

In reality, Miharu was dainty and light. She had a soft,

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feminine body that Rio inadvertently felt through her clothes, despite the fact that she was wearing a thick outer coat — borrowed from Rio — over her uniform. To be honest, Rio was struggling quite a bit internally, but he desperately feigned composure to avoid being distracted by her body.

"I'll focus on flying as safely as possible, but make sure you hold on tight anyway."

"O-Okay," Miharu nodded with a squeak, clinging to Rio timidly. She leaned her weight into him gently and clutched at his clothes. Their faces were almost close enough to touch.

Rio purposefully tore his gaze away from Miharu to speak to Aki and Masato standing to the side. "We'll be off, now. Make sure you lock up properly."

"Right. Let me fly when you get back!" Masato waved his hands with a carefree laugh.

"...Please take care of Miharu." Aki bowed her head while keeping a close eye on their faces, having sensed the peculiar atmosphere flowing between the two of them.

Rio gave a faint smile and nod before kicking off from the ground and rising into the air. The sight of Aki and Masato's figures on the ground grew smaller and smaller.

"Waaah, it's amazing." Miharu ogled at her surroundings as she tightened her grip on Rio.

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With a faint smile at the look of bewilderment on Miharu's face, Rio turned to call out to Aishia, who had been waiting in the air from some point. "Let's go, Aishia."

"Okay." Aishia closely watched Miharu being carried by Rio, before nodding.

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Miharu watched the endless scenic view from the skies in a daze. "...Wow, we're really flying through the sky," she murmured in wonder, several minutes after the flight had begun.

"Is it prettier than the view from the ground?" Rio asked with a smile tugging at his lips.

"It's gorgeous. I've never seen anything so beautiful before," Miharu answered in a breathy voice, captivated by the picturesque scenery before her.

"I'm glad to hear that. It'll be a while until we reach our destination city, so feel free to enjoy it all you want. You'll see a lot of different types of scenery on the way."

"Yes!" Nodding happily, Miharu's eyes darted about as she enjoyed the view.

Seeing her made Rio shift his gaze, too, and he similarly enjoyed the scenery. At the end of his line of sight was the ridgeline of the mountains and the surfaces of the lakes in the distance; they sparkled from the rays of sun shining between the clouds. They continued at that leisurely pace for half an hour or so until they reached their destination of Amande.

"Aishia. We can't descend right into the city, so we're stopping in the forest instead."

"Got it," Aishia replied, and they they landed together in the forest.

"Sorry, Miharu. We'll be going on foot from here. The ground is hard to walk on, so I'll carry you until we reach the

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road," Rio said.

The area was covered in dense vegetation and mossy undergrowth, making the footing terrible for walking on. While Miharu had an overcoat on, she was wearing her uniform skirt and leather shoes underneath, which would make the journey difficult.

"O-Okay. Thank you," Miharu replied, nodding nervously.

"I'll be running a little, so it may be a little bumpier than when we were flying. Be careful not to bite your tongue. Let's go, Aishia," Rio said to Miharu and Aishia, before making a gentle leap forward. Despite the fact that he was carrying Miharu, he was crossing several meters in a single stride.

"W-Wow. Amazing... Is this a type of sorcery, too?" Quietly tightening her grip around Rio, Miharu widened her eyes at what was clearly a display of superhuman abilities. Aishia was also following behind Rio with agile movements.

"I've enhanced my physical body and abilities through a technique called spirit arts. I'm also giving myself a little push by controlling the wind to help my movement and landing. Let me know if it's too fast for you," Rio said out of consideration for Miharu.

Miharu shook her head calmly. "I'm fine. It's not even shaking that much."

The group arrived at the road leading to Amande only a few minutes later. After checking there was no one else around, Rio gently lowered Miharu to the ground and handed her a necklace. "Before we go into the city, please put this on."

"Okay. What is it...?"

"An artifact that changes your hair color — people with black hair will draw attention around here. It'll return to normal once you remove the necklace, so there's no need for any concern about that."

"I understand," Miharu said, nodding, then put on the necklace as requested. Once she did, the necklace

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automatically started to absorb Miharu's essence and instantly changed her hair color.

"...Wow, it really changed."

"It suits you. ...Just so you know, the city we're about to head to is called Amande. Shall we go now?" Rio complimented Miharu shyly before starting to walk at a relaxed pace. Miharu and Aishia followed after him.

Ten minutes later, they were out of the forest and had reached Amande.

Miharu gazed in wonder. "...There's a lot of people."

They had entered the city to find huge bustling crowds, as the morning markets were still open. Stalls were lined everywhere, overflowing with clamoring liveliness.

"This is a trade city, so it's particularly busy. Most of the kingdom is uninhabited land, so people tend to swarm cities like this," Rio explained.

"I see... I'll have to be careful so I won't get lost," Miharu said with a mix of awe and worry as she watched everyone making their way around the crowds.

"Don't worry. Miharu should just do this," Aishia said, then suddenly grabbed Rio's left hand.

"Umm..." Rio showed a look of bewilderment as Miharu blushed with embarrassment.

"Now we won't get lost," Aishia offered simply. She was right, but both Rio and Miharu were too overcome with embarrassment to reach for each other's hands.

"You're not going to hold it?" Aishia tilted her head in question. Her expression made them doubt themselves, wondering if they were the weird ones for being so self-conscious.

"Ahaha. Then... excuse me." With a bemused smile, Miharu softly took Rio's hand.

"Let's go." Aishia nudged Rio — making Rio chuckle with a smile — then the three of them finally set off.

However, both Miharu and Aishia were both incredibly

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beautiful girls that instantly drew the attention of the men around. They sent glares filled with hatred and envy at Rio, as he was holding both their hands.

"...Haha... Okay, you two — put on your hoods. It seems like we're standing out," Rio suggested with a twitch in his face, unable to withstand the gazes.

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In the central business district of Amande...

"Apparently, this store has all the daily necessities for women," Rio explained to Miharu and Aishia as he stood in front of a towering building. He had asked a female stall owner if there were any shops that stocked all the necessities a woman would need; it was fine if it was a higher price as long as it was of a decent quality. All the female stall owners had pointed to this store.

"What a wonderful building..." Miharu said as she looked up at the four-story building.

"It's called the Ricca Guild, and it's a direct branch of the trade guild that's famous even in the neighboring kingdoms. The governor of this city, Liselotte, is also the president of the Ricca Guild."

There were several stores owned by the Ricca Guild in Amande; the city could even be considered the base for the guild.

This store should have all kinds of useful items in stock.

Rio recalled the last time he had visited Amande several years ago. Specifically, the rumor he had heard when he dropped by the city on his way from Strahl to Yagumo.

Yes — Rio unilaterally knew about the girl named Liselotte. The talented young woman was the daughter of Duke Cretia, the great lord of the Kingdom of Galarc. She was also the first person to bring the processed food "pasta" into this world. It was clear that Liselotte, or perhaps a

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person working with her in the shadows, was using knowledge from Earth.

The scale of the Ricca Guild had grown exponentially in the few years Rio was away from the Strahl region. It had even become a leading trade guild in several neighboring kingdoms as well; they would have certainly developed numerous new products in the last few years.

There was no way for Rio to make the daily life items modern Japanese women used, so this was the perfect solution for Miharu to do her shopping.

Just before they entered the building, Rio spoke up. “Okay, I’m leaving the rest to you two. I’ll come back to this store in around an hour. Just leave any interpreting to Aishia.”

Since it was a branch specializing in female-targeted products, it was difficult for Rio to enter as a male. She probably needed to buy underwear and other such things, so he figured it would be easiest to leave the chaperoning to Aishia.

“O-Okay…” Miharu nodded timidly.

“Aishia, please take care of Miharu… And make sure you don’t leave this store.”

“Yup, leave it to me.” Aishia gave a sincere nod.

…Well, I’m sure it’ll be fine. They wouldn’t be able to shop at their own pace with me around anyway.

Rio decided to trust the two of them. While he still had some concerns, he knew he couldn’t be too overprotective. The store’s security seemed reliable enough that the chance of strange customers would be low.

“See you later, then.”

With that, Rio let go of Miharu and Aishia’s hands.

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After parting ways with the girls, Rio began to gather

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information in the area around the building where Miharu was shopping.

Information spread slowly in this world, as the methods of communication weren't very advanced. Because of that, the most well-informed people were nobles, merchants, and guild members. They took in all kinds of information because of their contact with large numbers of people, as well as their ability to collude with others like themselves to create their own intelligence network. That was why common folk, like Rio, were unable to gain much information by just remaining passive. In order to find the information he wanted, he either had to be in contact with many people on a daily basis or proactively approach those with the knowledge.

At present, Rio was effectively gathering information by going around the stalls and talking to the merchants. He wasn't part of a guild and had no noble acquaintances, so the only way he could gather information was through the merchants available to him. By purchasing their products and chatting them up under the guise of a casual conversation, the merchants were more willing to talk. While he wasn't likely to gain any information of high secrecy or reliability, his efforts would likely be fruitful nonetheless.

Rio visited a stall that sold grilled skewers and ordered a fair amount before addressing the female store owner. "Has anything of importance happened recently? I was really surprised when those pillars of light appeared the other day."

"Oh my, haven't you heard? People say that was the sign of the hero appearing," the stall owner replied as she grilled the meat.

"The… hero?" The word hero took Rio by surprise, making him widen his eyes.

"You know of the sacred prophecy at least, right? The one

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about the great hero that appears alongside the six pillars of light. Since the exact events of that prophecy occurred, the rumor is that the hero has appeared, too."

"Right, there was something like that. I see..." Rio nodded with comprehension.

The people of the Strahl region believed in the deities known as the Six Wise Gods. While Rio himself was not a man of faith, he had received classes during his time in the Royal Academy, so he could still vaguely remember the details of the sacred texts.

It might be related to how Miharu and the others appeared in this world... Or maybe they were dragged into the fray? If so, does that mean the two people with them... are the heroes? Rio thought, immediately breaking down the information and making his own hypothesis.

"Was there anything else that stood out recently around here? I was thinking of going to the Kingdom of Beltrum in the near future..."

"Hmm... They had a slightly larger scale skirmish with the Proxia Empire to the north just a while ago, but that's just business as usual." The female stall owner hummed as she answered, then remembered something. "Oh, that's right. If you're heading to the Beltrum Kingdom, then you'll have to pass through the western road, right?"

"Yes, that's right." In Rio's case, he would be flying over it with spirit arts, but he nodded anyway.

"Several adventurers have gone missing recently after heading out on missions along the west road. It isn't unheard of for people of their line of work to run away, but even skilled adventurers went missing, so it's been a bit of a hot topic. You look young, but your outfit says you're an adventurer, too. Be careful out there."

"...I see, thank you very much." Rio thanked her and carefully stored their conversation away in his head.

After that, the stall owner continued to chat up Rio even

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without his prompting; she was a rather talkative person, something that Rio was grateful for since his aim was to gather information. However, most of her chatter was unrelated to the topics he was interested in, so Rio decided to wrap up their talk and retreat when she started to bring up the desire to introduce her daughter to him.

Rio went around a few more stalls afterward, but was unable to gather any new information before he returned to Miharu and Aishia.

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Rio currently stood before the Ricca Guild's store.

Hmm... I said I'd be back after an hour, but is it okay to just walk in? It was a store that specialized in a wide range of daily items for women; as a man, it almost felt like a forbidden holy ground, making him fearful of intruding.

At that moment, Aishia stepped out of the store by herself. Miharu was nowhere to be seen.

"Huh... Aishia? Where's Miharu?"

"Haruto returned, so I came out to get you. Miharu is still shopping," Aishia replied succinctly.

"Oh, okay. But... how did you know I came back?"

"We're connected by a path, so I know when you're close by."

"I see... Come to think of it, Sara and the other spirit folk mentioned something like that."

Rio tried to remember what they had said about contract spirits when he was in the village — something about how the contract owner and contract spirit were deeply and spiritually connected by a path. Aishia had only just awakened, but Rio wondered curiously if she would become more sensitive in terms of their connection as more time passed.

"Miharu will become concerned, so let's go back quickly."

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Aishia grabbed Rio's hand and tried to go back inside the store.

"Right, yeah. Umm, is it… okay if I go in, too?"

Well, it should be fine with Aishia there, Rio thought, allowing himself to be dragged along. If there was an issue, he could just leave again anyway.

Surprisingly, he could spot some other men that were accompanying women inside the store. Each of them seemed rather uncomfortable to be there — Rio could empathize.

When Rio and Aishia entered the store, the gazes of the men who had been standing by as chaperones were naturally drawn to Aishia's beauty. However, the women they were accompanying keenly noticed the change in the men and sent them a few admonishing signs, such as clearing their throats and the like. The men awkwardly pretended like they hadn't been staring, even though they were still sneaking looks. Perhaps a similar thing had been happening while Rio was out gathering information too.

"Miharu is on the fourth floor."

Aishia ignored the looks from all the men and guided Rio. Their linked hands must have stood out, as the attention of both men and women in the store was on them. The men were shooting glares of envy at Rio, while the women seemed to be staring at his face in admiration.

"Oh my, she had someone with her."

"Hmm…"

"Well, he suits her, at least."

The voices of the women could be heard throughout the store.

Awkward… Rio felt an extreme sense of discomfort.

The gazes never really left them, so he focused on watching Aishia's back silently as he moved his feet. They climbed the stairs until they arrived at the fourth floor.

"We're here."

Hearing Aishia's voice, Rio finally looked around at his

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surroundings again. He was met with the sight of:

"…Huh? Ah…"

A lingerie shop.

There were no men chaperoning this time, as was to be expected, and the women present were all selecting underwear that suited them as they pleased. Miharu was among them. She stood right in front of Rio and stared at undergarments with a serious expression. In her hand was a cute and stylish bra with a modest amount of lace on it.

"Miharu," Aishia called out.

"Oh, Ai-chan. Where were you? Ah, Haruto's back too… now…" Miharu looked away from the underwear and toward the direction of Aishia's voice. Rio was also there, holding Aishia's hand. He made eye contact with Miharu.

Miharu attempted to greet Rio with a smile when she realized there was something crucially wrong with the situation. She froze on the spot.

The underwear in Miharu's hands entered Rio's vision, causing him to apologize while looking away. "S-Sorry."

"Eh, ah…?!" Miharu finally understood the situation and hid the underwear in her hands in a panic. Her cheeks turned bright red.

"Umm, I'm sorry. Really," Rio said, apologizing once more. He immediately tried to let go of Aishia's hand and turn on his heel, but she had a surprisingly strong grip on him, so he couldn't move. All he could do was bow his head and stare at the floor instead.

"Ah, umm, m-me too!" Miharu lowered her head at Rio in return.

As they were exchanging bows, a female store attendant must have become suspicious, as she called out to them. "Is something the matter?"

"The three of us came here to shop," Aishia summarized in a flat voice, then looked at Rio's face and linked hands with him. That was enough to convince the store attendant.

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“Oh, I see. That’s fine, then; accompanying gentlemen aren’t forbidden from entering or anything. There are many customers who wish to bring them along and ask for their opinions, too,” she said, shaking her head with an understanding smile.

At some point, they had caught the attention of the other women in the lingerie shop. They had caught wind of the situation and were giggling to themselves.

“I-I’ll come back in another hour. A-Aishia, let go of my hand…” Rio said, quickly retreating from the lingerie shop after he got Aishia to unlink their hands.

I think I’ll write a letter to Professor Celia… I need to tell her that I’ll be late. I’ll definitely go see her, though…

Once he stepped outside the store, he walked to the Ricca Guild branch that handled deliveries.

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Roughly one hour later, Rio once again returned to the building where Miharu was shopping. They either must have just finished their shopping, or Aishia had sensed his approach, as the two of them came outside to meet him.

When Miharu’s eyes met Rio’s, she blushed with embarrassment. Rio grimaced uncomfortably.

“I’m sorry for the lack of consideration I showed earlier,” Rio apologized.

“N-No, I’m the one who should have been more careful. You were brought along by Ai-chan, after all. Ahaha… I’d appreciate it if you could forget everything.” Miharu laughed embarrassedly and shook her head; it was a commendable effort on her part to put the encounter behind them.

“Y-Yes. That aside, it doesn’t look like you have any bags. Did you finish your shopping?”

“Ah, the shop said they’d hold onto the bags. We can pick them up on our way home.”

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“I see… That’s a useful service. Let’s go shopping for Masato’s clothes, then.”

Miharu nodded at Rio’s suggestion. “Yes, please.” They had somehow managed to clear the awkward air between them.

Suddenly, Aishia reached for Rio’s left hand and held it. Rio smiled at how natural the movement was for them now.

“Umm, may… may I take your right hand?” Miharu asked Rio shyly.

“…Yes. We wouldn’t want to get separated,” Rio agreed bashfully.

Thus, the three headed for the next store, holding hands. They found a decent shop for men’s clothing in a matter of minutes and went inside to pick out clothes for Masato. Miharu examined all the clothes carefully to select something good for Masato, when she suddenly found clothing that looked good for Haruto.

“This one looks like it’d suit you, Haruto.”

“R-Really?”

“Yes. Could you try holding it up to yourself? …Ah, see, it really does suit you.”

She handed the clothes over for Rio to hold, then stepped back to look at him from a distance with a beaming smile. Rio smiled in return, appearing somewhat bashful.

“Thank you very much. I am lacking in everyday clothes, so I think I’ll get this.”

Since Rio usually wore combat clothing or semi-combat clothing that could also act as casual attire, he didn’t have many articles that served as solely for everyday wear. This was the perfect opportunity to amend that.

“Umm, then would it be better to buy a few more pieces?”

“Sure. Since you’re here, could I ask you to help me pick them? I’m not very good at choosing clothes…” Rio requested with a wry smile.

“If you’re okay with that, then…” Miharu nodded

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hesitantly, then began to select clothes not only for Masato, but Rio as well. She had a good sense of style, and made sure to coordinate Rio's clothes to suit each other.

Time passed by in a flash. "Thank you very much, Miharu. We've gotten some good shopping done, thanks to you," Rio said after he finished buying their items.

"No, I should be thanking you. I had a lot of fun today."

"I'm happy to hear that. Once your language studies have progressed a bit, we should come here again with Aki and Masato as a breather… Since the plan is to stay where we are for another month, at least."

After they learned a fair amount of the language, he might bring them to the spirit folk village. Nonetheless, it would probably require further discussion first.

"Yes, please!" Miharu said, smiling happily.

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Rio and the girls were able to return to the rock house in the field before the sun had set. They ate dinner and then settled down to enjoy tea together, when Rio suddenly spoke up.

"Actually, I may have gained some plausible information today about the two people you were with just before you were brought to this world. It's not bad news, either."

"R-Really?!" Aki stammered, immediately drawn to Rio's words.

"More or less, yes. It wouldn't be very trustworthy information under normal circumstances, and it doesn't help us with their location, unfortunately." Rio shrugged his shoulders and nodded.

"So, what did you find out about the two of them?" Aki pressed impatiently.

Rio smiled faintly. "The two of them… may have become heroes, I guess," he explained in a frank manner. Aki

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couldn't help but doubt what she had heard.

"...Huh?" she asked.

Not only did Aki doubt what she was hearing, but Miharu and Masato also had expressions of astonishment. Their reactions were understandable; heroes weren't a common career path for a modern day Japanese person, after all.

"Well, I guess that's the normal reaction to have." Rio watched the reaction of the three Earthlings with his usual wry smile. Meanwhile, Aishia breathed a small and sleepy yawn from where she sat beside him.

"Hey, Haruto. By hero, do you mean something like the main character of a video game?" Masato asked hesitantly.

"It's probably exactly like that, I believe."

"Huh... Seriously? Bro as a hero, you say... I guess I kind of get it, but it doesn't suit him at all!" Masato said with a somewhat amused grimace.

"This world has religious beliefs, too, and the sacred texts speak of a prophecy where the heroes are summoned. The phenomenon in that prophecy came true at nearly the same time you three were dragged into this world. That's why a rumor is circulating that heroes have appeared in the Strahl region."

"And those heroes are Satsuki and Takahisa?" Miharu asked.

"Yes. The prophecy claims there are six heroes, so I believe they must be two of them. The event that occurred was on a large enough scale for it to be just that."

Though Rio had been too distracted by the feminine voice in his head to look at them directly, the six pillars of light that had appeared in that moment had scattered a tremendous amount of ode and mana — enough for him to believe that heroes could indeed be summoned from another world.

"Then... would we be able to meet the two of them if we find out where all the heroes are?!" Aki asked expectantly.

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“If my hypothesis is right, then yes. The prophecy said the heroes would appear by the Sacred Stones, but who knows where those Sacred Stones are,” Rio replied with a troubled look. There was a lot of information readily available about the location of the Sacred Stones, but it was normal to assume all of it was misleading or false.

“That can’t be…” Aki’s face darkened in frustration.

“It’s okay. They have to be somewhere in Strahl, so as long as we keep waiting, more rumors of the heroes will circulate eventually. It’s best if we just wait patiently. Of course, I’ll do what I can to find out more about the Sacred Stones and heroes, but I’d like the three of you to focus on learning the language for now. Is that all right with you, Miharu?” Rio looked at her for a response.

“Yes. We’ll be placing all the burden on you, Haruto, but please take care of us,” Miharu agreed apologetically.

“Then, that’s decided — you’ll start learning the language from tomorrow. It may get a bit rigorous at times, but the harder you work, the faster you’ll learn. You’ll eventually be able to put more time into other things. Let’s all do our best!” Rio said to the others to motivate them.

“Yes, please teach us well!” Aki said energetically, fired up by his words.

“Studying, huh… Even though we’ve come to another world, the things we have to do haven’t changed…” Masato sighed and grumbled to himself.

“Masato, I’m warning you now. If you don’t do this properly, I’ll be angry.”

“I know!” Masato nodded bitterly at Aki’s warning. He was aware that this was a necessary task, at the very least.

Miharu watched the two of them with a pleasant smile.

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After that, Rio worked together with Miharu and Aishia to

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clean everything up. They would begin their language studies in the morning, so Aki and Masato were sent off to bed early.

“Good work, Miharu… And you, too, Aishia. We should go to sleep soon too,” Rio said to the two girls at the dining table.

Miharu bowed. “Okay. Thank you for everything today, Haruto. You too, Ai-chan,” she said, looking at Aishia.

“Good work, Miharu,” Aishia replied sleepily.

“Ahaha. You look sleepy, Aishia — let’s go to bed right away. Good night!”

Rio figured that if he stuck around any longer he’d just be keeping Miharu and Aishia awake with him, so he started to walk toward his room.

“Good night,” Aishia said, before following after Rio. Miharu bid them good night, before walking off to her own room.

“Wait, huh? A-Ai-chan, isn’t your room next to mine? It’s just Haruto’s room in that direction. Aren’t you going to bed?” Miharu found something odd about the direction Aishia was heading and called out to stop her.

“Aishia?” Rio said with wide eyes, wondering what was the matter.

“I’m going to sleep.” Aishia cocked her head blankly.

“Umm… Where?” Rio asked nervously.

“In Haruto’s room.”

“E-Eeh?!” Miharu exclaimed in shock at Aishia’s reply.

“Umm… You have your own room, though. You’re supposed to sleep there,” Rio said carefully to Aishia, holding his head in his right hand.

“I sleep with Haruto,” Aishia declared in a pure and innocent manner.

“N-No, you can’t do that,” Rio declined in a panic, but Aishia only seemed to be curious as to why that was.

“Why not?”

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“Well, that’s because…”

It seemed as though she was unfamiliar with the subtleties of personal boundaries between a man and a woman. Rio was left at a loss for words as he looked at Miharu for assistance.

“Ah, umm. You know, Ai-chan… It’s a little problematic — rather, unfavorable — for a man and a woman to sleep together in the same room if they’re not in an intimate relationship,” Miharu explained tactfully, trying to save Rio from his dilemma.

“Why?”

“U-Umm…” Aishia’s childlike question left Miharu the one at a loss for words this time. It was surprisingly difficult to explain the common sense rules and morals that applied to human society using words. Simply saying that it wasn’t allowed wasn’t enough for a spirit like Aishia to understand.

Aishia looked at Miharu with innocent eyes. “Aren’t Haruto and I intimately related?”

“Ah, erm, that’s not what I mean.”

Intimate? What was intimate? Why were the right words so hard to choose? Despite trying her best, Miharu was at an utter loss.

“If we can’t sleep as just the two of us, then do you want to join in, too?” Aishia suggested.

“T-That’s even more impossible!” Miharu turned red and shook her head.

“Why?”

“Huh? Ah, because… I-I have someone I love already. Ah — no, wait, t-that doesn’t mean I hate Haruto by any means, though!” Miharu was babbling incoherently and replying to everything with foolish honesty.

“…Yes, I know. Haha.”

Hearing that Miharu had someone she loved had been a mild shock to Rio, but he somehow managed to keep a smile on his face. He had marginally suspected such a thing

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already.

“I don’t get it,” Aishia murmured quietly to herself. Rio sighed and smiled wryly. “…Why do you want to sleep with me anyway, Aishia?”

“I can replenish ode more efficiently by Haruto’s side. It’s also more comfortable,” Aishia answered. The second part aside, it was a surprisingly logical reason.

“Oh, replenishing essence. That’s true… But if you’re a spirit, you should be able to take on an astral form as well, right? Wouldn’t you be able to suppress the depletion of your essence more in that state…?”

Since Aishia had a humanoid form, it felt so natural for her to be physically materialized that Rio had forgotten that spirits normally preferred to exist in their astral form. Materializing and maintaining a physical form expended a certain amount of magic essence, so it was an extremely inefficient use of their energy.

“Astral… form?” Miharu asked, unable to keep up with the conversation.

“She has a physical body right now, but at their core, spirits are actually embodiments of mana. So, like their name suggests, they have a spiritual form. Normally, they are unperceivable to humans — that form is called the astral form.”

“…I-I see. Then Ai-chan can take on that astral form, too?” Miharu seemed slightly dubious as she looked at Aishia.

“I can.” Aishia nodded. Her body suddenly turned to fine particles of light and dispersed in the blink of an eye.

“S-She disappeared? Ai-chan?” Miharu’s eyes widened in shock as she hesitantly called Aishia’s name.

“I’m here,” Aishia replied; the particles of light gathered together to take on her form once more.

Miharu made a noise of wonder and turned to Rio for confirmation. “Wah… T-That was the astral form just now?”

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“Yes. You won’t be able to see her or physically interact with her, but she still exists there in her astral form. Spirits expend essence by simply existing, so they use much less energy when in their astral form.”

Miharu looked at Aishia. “I understand… Ah, then if you stayed in your astral form on a regular basis, you wouldn’t need to sleep together with Haruto anymore… is that right?”

“Essence recovery isn’t that big of a deal. I will replenish essence more efficiently the closer I am to Haruto, but if I don’t use any spirit arts, then it isn’t that difficult for me to stay in physical form even without Haruto nearby,” Aishia explained logically with a shake of her head.

“Umm, then, do you still need to sleep together with Haruto…?”

“Yes. I want to be with Haruto.”

“A-Ahaha. Really… Ah, then, how about… you sleep with Haruto in your astral form? How about that instead?” Miharu suggested, looking at Rio with a strained smile.

“Umm… I guess, yeah. That should be, well… all right, I suppose?” Rio nodded with uncertainty, though he wasn’t quite sure if doing that actually solved the moral issue of a man and woman sleeping together in the same room. At least no physical mishaps could occur while she was invisible in her astral form.

Aishia seemed pretty stubborn over the whole thing herself, making it nearly impossible to convince her otherwise. It was only a makeshift solution at best, but it was a safe line to draw as a compromise.

“Are you okay with that, Ai-chan?” Miharu asked.

“Sure.” Aishia nodded quietly.

Thus, it was decided that Aishia would sleep in Rio’s room in her astral form. And if Rio woke up to her sleeping in her physical form the next morning — well, that was a story for another day.

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Interlude: Summoning A Hero?! Sakata Hiroaki On The Scene!

Meanwhile, just before Miharu and the others found themselves in another world…

His name was Sakata Hiroaki; he was a 19-year-old Japanese young man with an average appearance. While he was in a highly-ranked group at his prep school, he failed his university entrance examinations and became even more of a shut-in, then immersed himself in all sorts of indoor hobbies instead — just like any normal young man would.

On one fine spring day, Hiroaki was lying on his bed in his parents' house and playing with his PC tablet. He idly visited his favorite websites, watched videos, read novels, played games, and posted on forums to his heart's content, making the most of his fun and fulfilling life as a shut-in.

It was then that Hiroaki's world changed completely.

Dressed in his sweats, he had been lying down with his tablet held above him, when suddenly, he felt like he was falling.

"Whoa!" Hiroaki shouted in surprise. However, he hadn't actually fallen anywhere, and was still lying on his back. The tablet in his hand hadn't fallen, either, but the sensation against his back was strangely rugged and hard. And that wasn't all —

For some reason, the background behind his tablet was no longer his ceiling, but a vast, clear blue sky. Hiroaki reflexively arched his neck and looked around.

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“H-Huh? What’s going on?!”

Gathered right next to him were foreign-looking knights and soldiers armed with swords, spears and armor that looked they were taken straight from an outdated fantasy setting.

“Eh?!” Hiroaki sprung up, startled. While he was dressed quite foolishly, he was nothing if not utterly serious right now.

Ogling at his surroundings, a completely unfamiliar scenery stood before him. It seemed as though he was in the garden of an elegant mansion; the ground was covered in paved stone tiles, while the garden around him was filled with nature. A castle-like structure towered a little further in the distance, imposing enough to be called a palace.

The armed knights and soldiers, unfitting for the quiet and tranquil atmosphere of the garden, warily surrounded Hiroaki with a certain degree of awe.

Hey, hey... what the hell is this?! Hiroaki stood up in a panic and checked his own situation. He felt faintly more relieved to see his tablet in his left hand and his well-worn sweats on his body. However, he noticed that at some point, he had begun to clutch a European-style longsword in his grasp. It filled him with surprise and a sense of excitement.

A s-sword...? That’s a cool design... It tingles my childish heart.

But when he looked at the armed people around him, he felt a sense of wariness.

Once he had calmed down, he found the combination of the sword with his sweats to be unbearably lame, and he began to feel embarrassed too. Hiroaki tightened his grip on the sword in his hands and braced his tablet as if it were a shield.

“Ah... Umm, can you understand me? Who are all of you?” he asked, forcing down his sense of embarrassment.

A stillness fell over them... Or so Hiroaki had thought.

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After a moment, someone appeared from between the crowd of knights and soldiers — a cute, lavender-haired girl in her mid-teens, wearing an elegant fluttering dress.

Damn, that's some high quality... It's like some beautiful girl stepped straight out of a television. Is she a princess? Hiroaki thought in a daze, captivated.

Meanwhile, the lavender-haired girl took a look at Hiroaki's appearance. Her eyes widened. After a pause, the middle-aged man next to the girl murmured something to her. Immediately after, the girl started walking toward Hiroaki with determination. The man followed, as well as two other young-looking knights. Hiroaki braced himself warily.

"U-Umm, my name is Flora. Flora Beltrum. I'm the second princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum. May I ask if you might possibly be... the hero?" she questioned nervously, having stopped at an appropriate distance from Hiroaki. For some reason, he was able to understand her words.

Hiroaki inspected the self-proclaimed princess and cocked his head in suspicion. "Hero...? Me?"

It was fishy, but it somehow matched the current situation perfectly. In fact, it was extremely similar to the prologue of the world-jumping fantasy novel he had read most recently.

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“Y-Yes! The Sacred Stone I carry in my custody suddenly began to glow, just before it let out a huge pillar of light. According to the prophecy of the Six Wise Gods, the hero will appear by the Sacred Stone one-thousand years after the Holy Era begins.” Flora explained in a rather rushed way as best she could.

Hiroaki organized his thoughts. “…Ah, wait, hold on a sec. Let’s calm down first, princess. Putting aside the meanings of all those words for now, what you’re saying is that I appeared by the Sacred Stone you carry. That’s why I’m the hero?”

“Y-Yes. That’s why.” Flora nodded.

“I see. Well, this is a fairly cliché situation if I’ve ever seen one. And you can understand Japanese, for some reason. I suppose being on Easy Mode isn’t that bad…” Hiroaki murmured to himself.

“U-Umm.” Flora carefully watched Hiroaki’s face. “May I please ask for your name, great hero?” she inquired.

“…I’m Sakata Hiroaki.” Hiroaki ruffled his hair in a pompous gesture. “Just to clear it up now, Sakata is my family name and Hiroaki is my first name. I’d like to ask you something too. Where am I?”

“This is Marquess Rodan’s territory in the northeast of Beltrum. The consulate of the capital of Rodania.”

“Have you ever heard of these country names: Japan, America, England, France, Germany, or China?”

“Erm, I have not.” Flora shook her head apologetically.

“I see…” Hiroaki sighed a small sigh.

I’ve got an idea of the general picture now, at least… This is what you would call your typical cliché fantasy trip. Judging from the princess’s attitude, there’s no mistaking that the hero is of a similar status to royalty. If so, whether I’m actually the hero or not, would it be better to pretend I’m the hero anyway? While it’d be annoying to be treated as their go-to guy to solve all their problems, I don’t want

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them to look down on me, and I need more information. If I'm going to negotiate with them, I need to stand above them.

At the very least, Flora was a fair maiden, and it wasn't bad to be respected as a hero. And so, he braced himself to be able to carry himself with skill and tact.

"So, who's your friend there?" Hiroaki addressed the middle-aged man standing next to Flora. He appeared to be of a rather high-ranking status.

"Pardon my rudeness. I am the duke, Gustav Huguenot. Due to certain circumstances, I am currently serving as Her Highness Princess Flora's guardian. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Duke Huguenot pasted a sociable smile on his face and greeted him respectfully. However, his eyes showed no trace of weakness as he carefully observed Hiroaki.

"Got it. For now, I'd like to get a better understanding of the situation. I'm sure you would agree, right? Don't you think we owe each other some explanations?"

Duke Huguenot nodded agreeably. "Indeed, that is true. Allow me to show you to a place where we can discuss this while seated."

"Great. Thanks." Hiroaki headed toward the mansion with Flora and her entourage.

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Several minutes later, Hiroaki was lowering himself into a sofa across from Flora and her group.

"This is George Rodan, the lord of this territory," Duke Huguenot said.

"An honor to meet you, hero. I am most delighted to welcome the hero of legend into my humble residence." The middle-aged Marquess Rodan bowed his head at Hiroaki with reverence.

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“Yeah, nice to meet you. Are you going to tell me the names of those knights over there, too? They seem pretty young… Even younger than me, and I’m nineteen.” Hiroaki curiously looked at the two knights standing behind Flora.

“They’re our sons. As you can see, they’re in their mid-teens, and have a long way to go. I allowed their presence here, hoping it would be a good lesson for them. Does this displease you?”

“I see… The sons of Huguenot and Rodan. I don’t mind, but… I’d like them to remove their weapons, at least,” Hiroaki warily requested while leaving his own longsword by his side. The two young knights stiffened by a fraction.

“Pardon our rudeness. You two — disarm yourselves,” Duke Huguenot ordered them with a smile.

“Yes, sir.” The two boys nodded uncomfortably, taking their scabbards from their waists.

“I shall take care of those.” A girl in noble clothing approached from the corner of the room and retrieved the two swords.

“Thank you.” The boys greeted the girl with a small bow.

“This is a good opportunity. The three of you, introduce yourselves to the hero,” Duke Huguenot urged.

“…Nice to meet you, hero. I am Stewart Huguenot.”

“…I’m Alphonse Rodan. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” The two boys introduced themselves to Hiroaki first in stiff voices, watching him with faintly dubious eyes.

“It is an honor to meet you. My name is Roanna Fontaine. Pleased to make your acquaintance.” The noble girl smiled elegantly as she introduced herself.

Hiroaki widened his eyes, captivated by Roanna’s smile. “Yeah… Nice to meet you. Sorry, but you were standing in a corner, so I didn’t notice you. I cannot allow a lady to remain standing while I sit, though… Won’t you take a seat?”

Roanna shook her head with a troubled expression. “No, I’m…”

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“If the hero says to sit down, then take a seat, Roanna,” Duke Huguenot insisted.

“…Thank you very much for your consideration, hero. Then, if you would excuse me.” Roanna lifted her skirt and curtsied, then entrusted Stewart and Alphonse’s swords in her hands to a servant and sat down on the sofa. Hiroaki watched her with a smirk at his lips.

“Now, may we proceed to the main point of our discussion, hero?” Duke Huguenot asked. Hiroaki nodded coolly. “There’s something I’d like to ask first.”

“What might it be? If it’s something we can answer, we shall answer to the best of our ability…”

“What summoned me was that Sacred Stone thing held by Princess Flora, right?” Hiroaki asked, looking at the princess.

“Y-Yes. That’s right!” Flora agreed almost nervously.

“The fact I’ve been summoned means that — naturally — I can go back too, right?”

“Huh? Go back? Umm, that’s…” Hiroaki’s question must have been unexpected, as Flora was rendered speechless. Her reaction was enough to tip off the sensitive hero.

“Oi oi, don’t tell me you summoned me here with no way for me to get back.”

“No, it’s just… Umm… I don’t know…”

“If you don’t know, then doesn’t that make this an abduction? Taking someone away against their will is considered a crime in this world, too, is it not?” Hiroaki pushed without giving Flora time to respond.

“I-I’m sorry. I don’t know the circumstances either, so we’re actually a little troubled by it all…” With her naturally gentle disposition, Flora could do nothing but apologize in return; her side of it had no idea what was going on, either. The Sacred Stone had summoned Hiroaki by itself, so calling it an abduction was a rather extreme way of misunderstanding the situation.

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“Ah, it’s not like I’m trying to be mean. It’s just that I’m the one in a bind because of this, you know?” Even Hiroaki seemed to feel ashamed of persecuting a pretty girl like Flora, as he inclined his head guiltily.

“Hero, isn’t your attitude toward Her Highness rather rude? Is this the proper manner of a hero?” Stewart objected with furrowed brows.

“Stewart!” Duke Huguenot called in a stern voice.

“Guh… My deepest apologies,” Stewart said with a vexed expression.

Duke Huguenot bowed his head deeply at Hiroaki. “Please pardon my son’s rudeness, hero.”

“Ah, don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not trying to pick a fight or anything. It’s just that I had a life in my original world, too. One that was unfairly taken away from me. I just wanted to make that clear. If you all participated in my abduction, then we should approach this in a logical manner. Even if you suddenly tell me that I’m the hero, there’s not much I can do about it.” Hiroaki shook his head.

“That applies to us, too… And the abduction is a misunderstanding. It looks like there is a need to lay all our cards on the table and discuss things properly. We vow to tell you everything we know at this point in time, hero. Will you lend us an ear?” Duke Huguenot asked with a slightly perplexed look.

“Yeah, that’d be great. Even if you talk about Six Wise Gods and Sacred Stones and heroes, it doesn’t really make sense to me,” Hiroaki said with a relaxed smile.

After that, Duke Huguenot explained various facts to Hiroaki, including their request for the hero’s cooperation.

At that very same moment, Miharu and the others were wandering about the grasslands.

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Chapter 7: Preparing To Move

A month and a half passed since the shopping trip in Amande. During that time, Miharu, Aki, and Masato had remained shut away inside the rock house, cramming the common tongue of the Strahl region into their heads. Since nothing could proceed if they weren't able to speak the language, they prioritized learning the language over everything else, beating words and phrases into their heads from morning to night, even during meals.

While there is plenty to be said about the number of hours needed to acquire a foreign language to a conversational standard, Rio's Japanese guests were able to study the Strahl common tongue for over 400 hours over the span of a month and a half — that culminated to nine hours a day on average. That number became much higher once their own voluntary self-study time during breaks was included.

In the beginning, a lot of the time was spent explaining the grammar structures in Japanese, but as time passed, more emphasis was placed on conversation. The lessons proved to be successful, as the three were able to converse to an optimal degree. As the eldest, Miharu showed the most remarkable improvement — as long as her conversation partner spoke slowly, she was able to reply with halting speech.

On one morning after a month and a half had passed, Rio and Miharu were cooking breakfast in the kitchen and speaking to each other using what Miharu had learned.

"*Haruto... can you give... frypan?*" she asked Rio in a clumsy Strahl tongue.

"*Sure, here you go.*"

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“*Thank you very much. Bacon egg or fried egg… Which do you want today?*”

Rio thought for a moment before making his request with a faint smile. “*…Let’s see. I want to eat a fried egg today.*”

“*Understood. Leave it… to me.*” Miharu picked up the frying pan and pumped her fists in a cute gesture.

“*You can say quite a few things now.*”

“*It’s all thanks… to Haruto.*”

“*It’s because you worked hard, Miharu.*”

“*No… it’s because… you were teaching… constantly.*”

“*Since the three of you have learned quite a few words at this point, I’m thinking it’s about time we moved from this field.*”

“*Moved…?*”

“Yes,” Rio interrupted, speaking in Japanese. “This conversation is about to get complicated, so I’ll use Japanese now. Staying here like this makes it hard to move around, and that’s ineffective for gathering more information about your friends. There are some trustworthy people I know that we may be able to rely on, but I’ll need to ask them first. The probability is low, but there’s even a chance these people may know something about you guys.”

“I see…”

“If possible, I’d like to ask those people to look after you while I finish some personal errands of my own and gather information. What do you think?”

“Umm… I’m sure you have your own life to concern yourself with, so it’s okay if you put us second. We’ll let you decide what you need to do,” Miharu said apologetically, bowing her head to Rio.

“All right. Then we’ll move closer to Amande today. I’ll have you guys wait there while I pay a visit to my acquaintances. It’ll take roughly two weeks for me to return, so I’ll leave Aishia behind to protect you, and if you need anything during that time you can feel free to go shopping in

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Amande, too,” Rio said with a slight smile.

He wasn’t shameless enough to suddenly bring Miharu and the others along to the spirit folk village and just leave them there for the spirit folk to look after. The spirit folk had already cut off contact with the outside world, so it was possible that they would refuse, but he would go through all the proper steps to make the request.

“I’m sorry for making you have to consider every little thing. As you’ve been looking after us, I won’t say that we’ll be fine… but I’m sure we’ll somehow manage ourselves, especially with Ai-chan here. So… you can leave the house to us.”

“Okay, thank you.” Rio nodded amicably in an effort to avoid making Miharu worry any more than she already was.

Afterward, they had their breakfast, then moved the house to the middle of a forest on the outskirts of Amande. There had been rumors of people going missing along the western road the last time Rio had gathered information in Amande, so he set up the house near the east side of the city instead.

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The next morning, Rio dressed himself in his Black Wyvern armor and prepared to leave. “All right then, Aishia — I’m leaving everyone to you,” he said in the living room.

Aishia nodded quietly. “Sure.”

While she looked like a fragile young woman, Aishia was actually a humanoid spirit ranked high-class or greater. Since she could use the same level of spirit arts as Rio, there was no one better for the role of a bodyguard.

“I’m going to leave this spirit stone filled with essence with you while I’m gone, so you can use this to replenish your magic essence if anything happens,” Rio said, handing Aishia a pebble-sized emerald green spirit stone that glowed. It was possible to store an enormous amount of essence in a

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green spirit stone, even one of this size. The Time-Space Cache Rio received from the spirit folk used a stone of a similar size, too.

"...Understood. I tied a temporary path to Miharu just in case, so it'll be okay," Aishia said, taking the spirit stone.

"With Miharu... Really?" Rio's eyes widened, and he looked at Miharu.

"Yes. Apparently, we have quite a large amount of magic essence within us? I don't really get it, but I told Ai-chan she could use whatever she needed." Miharu didn't seem to fully understand it all yet, but nodded firmly anyway.

"...I see. I'm relieved, then." Rio was interested in how the three of them had a large amount of essence, too, but was glad that that was the case so he didn't have to worry as much about them.

"Please go safely, Haruto," Miharu said.

"Yes. You don't have to see me off from here," he replied.

"Have a safe trip, Haruto."

"See you later, Haruto." Aki and Masato offered their words of parting to Rio as well.

"Thanks. Make sure you two listen to Miharu and Aishia."

"Ahaha, we know."

"That's right! We're not kids anymore!"

Aki and Masato nodded with strained smiles.

"You're still a brat, though," Aki noted.

"And there's only one year difference between us," Masato retorted, starting their usual bickering.

Rio watched Aki and Masato get up to their usual antics with a smile. "Looks like you'll be all right to me. I'll be going, now," he said, and turned on his heel. He was relieved to see the youngest of the three showing no signs of worry.

Rio opened the front door and waved back at Miharu and the others, who were waving with all their might. Finally, he looked at Aishia with an entrusting smile, before the door shut.

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“The three of you need to study until Haruto returns,” Aishia said.

“Ugh, so we’re doing the same old thing even with Haruto out.” Masato hung his head gloomily.

“We don’t have a choice. If we can’t speak the language, it’s too dangerous to even go outside. You’re the most behind, so work harder,” Aki said with an exasperated expression.

“Fufu. Let’s show Haruto how much we’ve improved when he comes back,” Miharu said with a smile.

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Once Rio stepped outside, he spoke the activation spell to use the Time-Space Cache on his left wrist.

“*Dissolvo*.”

The air above his hand warped, and a jade green spirit stone appeared. While it was the same color as the Time-Space Cache, its size was larger than the other spirit stone.

“*Transilio*.”

Rio activated the spirit stone in his hand — the teleportation crystal. The air around Rio and the teleportation crystal instantly started to distort in an exaggerated way, and in the next moment, Rio disappeared. The view in front of Rio’s eyes changed immediately, too.

“Looks like I made it back safely,” Rio murmured to himself.

Gentle rays of sunlight filtered through the trees of the forest scenery spread before him. It was his first time actually using the teleportation crystal, so he was surprised at how the scenery had changed in an instant. Thankfully, it seemed as though he had been able to teleport to the correct coordinates.

The crystal changed from green to turquoise; as the amount of magic essence inside a spirit stone increased, the

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color changed from colorless to blue. As it continued to increase, the colors changed to turquoise, leaf green, then finally jade green — so quite a large amount of essence was used.

I don't think I should be that far from the village, but where is this exactly?

Rio put the teleport crystal away into his pocket and smiled at the vaguely familiar scenery. Then, he kicked off from the ground and rose into the air to check his current location, breaking through the canopy and into the skies above the forest.

I'm outside of the residential area... but pretty close to the village — about one or two minutes away by flight. At this distance, they may have detected the distortion in essence from the teleportation sorcery I used.

Someone may have set out to get him already. With that in mind, Rio began to fly toward the residential district visible in the distance at a leisurely pace.

Sure enough, a group of people were waiting in the skies above the village. There were several warriors of the village, with Orphia among them.

"See, it is Rio after all! You came back fairly quickly this time," she said with a happy smile as she approached.

"Hello, Orphia. I have a little news this time... and a request," he said somewhat apologetically.

"I see... Then we should hurry to the elders immediately. Follow me — it's this way."

Orphia seemed to sense that Rio had an important matter to discuss and began to lead him away without asking any further questions. The villagers around them followed.

"Thank you very much. The truth is... my contract spirit woke up," Rio said as he flew alongside Orphia.

"Eh, really?!" Orphia asked with widened eyes.

The spirit sleeping within Rio had been a humanoid spirit, after all. To Orphia, who held spirits in high regard, the

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awakening of Rio's spirit was a big deal.

"Yes. Due to certain circumstances, she isn't present right now, but I'll discuss more about that — as well as my request — with the elders."

Orphia nodded. "I see… I'm sure everyone will be shocked. Let's hurry over!" She watched Rio's expression carefully before raising her flight speed by a small amount.

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Rio and the others landed before the giant tree house that was used as the town hall of the village. Latifa was waiting there, along with Sara, the silver werewolf, and Alma, the elder dwarf.

"Latifa… Sara and Alma too…" Rio's eyes widened when he spotted the girls.

"Ehehe. There was a big pulse of mana, so everyone was excited that Onii-chan might have come back. We saw Onii-chan flying in the air and hurried here," Latifa explained proudly. She must have run, as she was still out of breath.

"The two of them were in such a hurry — it was a huge pain," Alma interjected with a wry smile.

"Y-You're the one who decided to come along, Alma," Sara added on in embarrassment. Orphia smiled.

"Fufu, so the two of you both wanted to see Rio again as quickly as possible."

"Mrgh…" Sara and Alma groaned in embarrassment, but their lack of denial implied it was the truth.

"Onii-chan, you came back quickly this time." Latifa beamed a smile full of purity and innocence.

"Yeah. My contract spirit woke up, and I have a lot of other things I wanted to discuss," Rio answered with a faintly strained smile.

"Y-Your spirit has awoken?!" Sara and Alma were both taken aback.

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“Yes. She’s not here right now, but I’ll bring her along next time.”

“In that case, we have to hurry to the head elders quickly. They should be upstairs,” Sara urged, and the group stepped into the town hall.

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Roughly half an hour later, in the meeting room on the top floor of the hall, Rio faced the council of elders that had assembled on short notice. Latifa and the other girls remained gathered in a corner of the room.

“So, is it true? Lord Rio’s contract spirit has awoken?” Syldora, the high elf seated in the middle of the three head elders, asked.

“Yes. She woke up just a month and a half ago.”

“…A month and a half ago would be the same time as when that vast torrent of ode and mana surged from the direction of the Strahl region,” Syldora surmised with a contemplative look. The pillars of light hadn’t been visible from the position of the village, but the aftermath of the ode and mana torrent was something that they clearly detected.

“So the waves reached here as well,” Rio said with a wry smile.

“Was that surge possibly related to your contract spirit’s awakening, Lord Rio?” asked the werefox head elder Ursula.

“No… I am not sure. However, the surge of ode and mana that everyone felt was most likely created via the sorcery of the six pillars of light.”

“…Do continue,” Ursula pressed.

“I believe the true form of those six pillars of light to be a type of time-space sorcery… something that can summon humans from other worlds into this one. There are religions in the Strahl region that believe in the deities called the Six Wise Gods. According to their ancient texts, it is said that six

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heroes who played an active role in the Divine War will return once more alongside six pillars of light. That is why the rumor of the heroes returning is spreading throughout Strahl like wildfire."

"Heroes… you say?" The elders in the room burst into a commotion after hearing it was possible that heroes from the Divine War had returned.

Rio glanced over at Latifa; her eyes were round as she carefully watched him. Like Rio, she also had memories of a life in another world. She must have been curious as to whether the other world involved was Earth.

I'll explain everything to Latifa later, Rio thought to himself with a strained smile.

"Does everyone know of the tales of the heroes passed down within the Strahl region?" he asked the elders sitting across from him.

"Even us spirit folk retain records of the Divine War that unfolded over a thousand years ago. It affected our ancestors, who lived toward the center of the continent, after all. It is said that they fought to drive away the evil forces," Syldora replied.

"In order to assist the upper high class spirit participating in the war, the village sent warriors out toward Strahl, too… Though most of those, including the upper high ranked spirit, never returned. It was said that the heroes appeared toward the final stages of the Divine War, but by then, the upper high class spirit was gone, and many of the warriors from our village had lost their lives…" Ursula continued.

"…So you don't know any of the specifics, then?" Rio asked inquisitively.

"Indeed — we do not know much about the heroes. The Seven Wise Ones… No, they were already six by that time, so they were what the humans called the Six Wise Gods. Those Six Wise Gods had seemingly appeared from nowhere, and were all equipped with Divine Weapons. That is all we

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know," Dominic said contemplatively.

"I have been wondering this for a while, but why do you seem so certain of the existence of a seventh god?" Rio asked. "No one in the Strahl region seems to acknowledge anything like a seventh god."

"Because our ancestors encountered the one who named themselves the seventh god during the beginning and the end of the Divine War. They visited the village early during the war and requested help from the upper high class spirit of the time to fight. Their goal for visiting the village toward the end of the war wasn't recorded, but it was noted that they were already exiled from the other six by that time," Dominic explained.

"...The seventh god didn't leave any information about the heroes?"

"That I am not sure of, since it was not recorded."

"Why do you believe those heroes were summoned here from another world, Lord Rio? Even if you say they appeared from outside of this world, I find it hard to believe..." Ursula asked Rio somewhat suspiciously.

"Because I am currently looking after two girls and a boy who used to live in that world."

Ursula's eyes widened. "...My word. So those three are the heroes?"

Rio shook his head. "No, they are not — they were in a location irrelevant to the pillars of light. It seemed like they were in the company of two other people just moments before they were summoned here, and they claimed to witness distortions in the air similar to summoning magic. I believe the other two were the ones summoned as the heroes, while the three under my protection were merely dragged along for the ride."

"Hmm... You were able to communicate with otherworlders?" Syldora asked without a moment's delay. It was a well-justified question.

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“…I was. Or rather, to be more precise, I already knew the language they spoke.”

With a completely serious expression, Rio answered honestly, but vaguely. He wanted to be as truthful as possible to the people he was about to ask a favor from. He already owed the spirit folk so much, and could no longer deceive them this far into their relationship.

“What do you mean by that…?” The elders all looked confused. The only one who understood was Latifa, who was speechless with shock.

“Please forgive me. I doubt my reasons would be believable even if I explained them here, and they are greatly off-topic to the current issue at hand. For now, could I ask that you take what I say at face value and accept that I was able to communicate with them? If necessary, I will explain further at a later date,” Rio said, bowing his head deeply at the elders.

“…I do not mind. I want to hear more about your contract spirit, too.” Ursula seemed to comprehend Rio’s feelings and readily agreed. The other elders exchanged looks before nodding hesitantly.

“All right. Then, is your contract spirit currently with those three people?” Syldora asked, changing the subject.

Rio nodded in acknowledgment. “Yes. Her name is Aishia, and I’m having her stay back in Strahl to protect them,” he replied somewhat apologetically.

“Does Lady Aishia know anything about the summoning of the heroes? Or did you find out anything about her identity?” Syldora asked.

“No, Aishia knew nothing. Not about why she was contracted to me, who she was, or even her own name. The name Aishia was something I gave to her.” Rio shook his head uneasily.

“…I see. Well, that seems fine. A high ranked spirit has awakened; for us, it is an exceedingly auspicious event. Lady

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Aishia… You named her with the ancient language of us spirit folk, yes? Warm spring, beautiful spring… An appropriate name for this season," Dominic said, laughing cheerfully.

"Heh. Well, it's exactly as Dominic says: there's nothing to be discouraged about, Lord Rio," Ursula agreed with a gentle smile. The other elders nodded, too, letting a bright atmosphere naturally fall upon the room.

"Thank you very much. Honestly, I pondered quite a bit over whether I should have returned to the village at this point in time. But when it came to Aishia and the other three I'm protecting, I was hoping I could get some information and help from everyone here, so I decided to visit."

"…While I doubt we will be much help regarding Lady Aishia, it may do you some good to visit the Great Dryas with her. Bring her to the village anytime," Syldora said with a pensive look.

"However, if I were to bring Aishia to this land, it would become necessary to bring the three under my care along as well…" Rio said, watching Syldora and the others carefully.

"They are *your* companions, after all. You are free to bring not only Lady Aishia, but the others as well. We will do whatever is in our power to assist you. I'm sure you currently have your hands full with those three, no?" Syldora said, adopting a welcoming attitude toward Miharu and the others.

"…Yes. The three of them wish to seek the other two from whom they were separated from — if they did in fact end up in this world — and return to their own world… but as of right now we're completely unable to progress. Above all else, I currently have no knowledge about time-space sorcery that can cross worlds. I was hoping that the people here who use time-space sorcery would be able to provide some clues to how they can be returned to their own world."

"Hmm… To be honest, we also have no idea about time-

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space sorcery that allows for teleportation across worlds. Of course, we will scrounge through the old texts in our village, but it may be best not to get your hopes up."

"No, that is more than I could ask for. I had actually feared you wouldn't allow a complete outsider into the village… I truly do not have enough words to express my gratitude."

"Hm… With regards to the three, we'll have to have them agree to a contract of complete confidentiality for when they return to Strahl after having gained knowledge of us. I'm sorry, but the existence of the village cannot be exposed," Syldora explained.

"Of course. I'll make sure to explain it to them myself," Rio agreed reassuringly.

Their stay had been accepted with merely that as a condition — it was not an exceptional request.

"Well, you have watched over them for a while now, and decided to seek help from us on their behalf. I have no concerns with regard to their personalities. There should be no problem," Ursula offered pleasantly, the corners of her lips turned up in a smile.

"Ursula is right," Syldora said, followed by the nods of Dominic and the other elders.

"…I am most honored by your faith in me." Rio bowed his head deeply, his heart filled with emotion. He was, quite simply, so grateful at how he was able to meet such people who believed in him without any doubts in their minds.

"Now that that's decided, we must prepare to welcome Lady Aishia and the others. We must also inform the Great Dryas of her." Dominic changed the topic heartily, as though to clear the intimate air that had come between them.

"That's right. Will you be returning to Strahl immediately, Lord Rio?" Syldora asked, latching onto Dominic's subject change.

"Yes — I don't want to keep them waiting for too long. I

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intend on departing again within a few days.”

“Hm. Then, make sure you stay in the village today, as there’s much more we’d like to discuss about Lady Aishia and the three otherworlders.”

“Of course.”

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Their conversation continued into the afternoon over a light meal. Rio told them various things about Aishia, then decided with the elders what rules would be in place for Miharu, Aki, and Masato’s visit to the village. By the time their discussions had concluded, it had already become evening, so they decided to call it a day.

Rio ended up staying at Ursula’s house that night. After dinner, he was told to rest and relax — which probably meant to look after Latifa.

Rio called her over to the room he was staying in to speak with her alone. Latifa had looked somber ever since the midway point of the discussions, so he needed to explain a few things to her.

“Hey, Latifa. Could you understand the discussion today?” Rio said as he watched her expression. The two of them sat in chairs facing each other.

Latifa nodded uncomfortably. “Yeah, I could. Those people are Japanese people, too, aren’t they?” she asked timidly.

“Yes, they’re Japanese.”

“...Does that mean you told them about how you used to be Japanese, too, Onii-chan?”

Rio nodded with a bitter smile. “That’s right. If I didn’t tell them, they’d wonder about how they were able to communicate with me.”

“Hmph... But it was a secret just between Onii-chan and me.” Latifa pouted her lips somewhat unhappily.

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“Are you mad?”

“It’s not that I’m mad, but…”

Rio smiled in faint amusement. “I see.”

“Mgrr! What are you laughing at?”

“At how cute you are, I guess?”

“…That’s not fair, Onii-chan,” Latifa mumbled quietly, giving Rio an admonishing glare.

“What is?”

“Nothing…”

“Listen, Latifa. Just because other people who know about Japan have appeared doesn’t mean that our relationship will change. Isn’t that right?” Rio offered persuadingly with a smile as he watched her sulk.

“…Yeah.”

“Nothing will change how special you are to me.”

“…Yeah.”

“…That’s why I hope you won’t be too shocked by this. Do you remember how I told you about my past life before? About the childhood friend I loved, and the little sister that moved away when my parents divorced.”

“Hm? I remember that…” Latifa inclined her head curiously.

“The truth is, two of the three people I’m looking after right now are those two people.”

“…Huh?”

“Ayase Miharu. The person I always loved when I was Amakawa Haruto. Well, she probably doesn’t remember me anymore… Also, Amakawa — no, Sendo Aki… We only lived together for three years, but she was my little sister. I doubt she remembers anything about me, either. I’m not sure if it’s a coincidence, but they’re two of the three people that are currently in my care,” Rio explained slowly to a confused Latifa.

“…Eh… T-Then, did you t-tell them?! Did you tell those two about yourself?” Not long after Latifa understood the

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explanation did she start firing back questions in shock.

Rio shook his head calmly. “No, I didn’t tell them I had the memories of someone named Amakawa Haruto. I didn’t think it was the right time to tell them that…” he said in a somewhat troubled voice.

“O-Oh, okay. But… why…?” Latifa asked hoarsely.

“I don’t want to confuse them too much right now — their mental state wouldn’t be the most stable, having suddenly been brought to an unknown world. You used to be the same too, Latifa. Right?” Rio answered with his sound reasoning.

“That’s…” Latifa was at a loss for words. Rio had a point.

However, Latifa didn’t believe that Rio was being honest, despite the fact that he hadn’t lied to her. Was Rio really fine with things that way? She didn’t know.

“That’s why I’d like to ask you to hide your past life from these three people for a while, too. Of course, I won’t forbid you from telling them if you insist on doing so, but… I’d like you to stay absolutely quiet about my past life. Can you promise me that?” Rio asked, showing her a glimpse of the guilt he felt.

“…Onii-chan, you actually want to tell them, don’t you?” Latifa murmured, asking after Rio’s true feelings instead.

“…That’s not true.” Rio shook his head with a bittersweet smile.

“Tell me how you really feel, Onii-chan. Otherwise, I won’t promise you,” Latifa persisted.

“…I want to keep my previous life a secret, just between me and you, I guess,” Rio said with a strained expression, speaking truthfully.

“…That’s unfair. That’s so unfair of you, Onii-chan,” Latifa murmured in a trembling voice, appearing as though she was on the verge of tears; she was unable to decide if Rio was lying or not.

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Two days later, Rio departed from the village once again to make his return trip to the Strahl region. He chose the square before the town hall as his departure point, with Latifa, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Ursula, Syldora, and Dominic there to see him off.

“All right, everyone — I’ll be going now. I should be back in roughly two weeks,” Rio said cheerfully to the seven of them.

“Take care of yourself,” Ursula replied on behalf of the head elders, supported by the nods of the other two.

“We’ll clean up the house where your guests will stay,” Sara said.

“And make the preparations for their welcome,” Orphia added.

Alma chimed in. “I’ll take care of the daily necessities.” The three girls seemed excited to meet the humans that would be coming.

“…Have a safe trip, Onii-chan,” Latifa offered quietly.

“Thanks. I’ll be back soon. Don’t worry — there’s nothing to be scared of.” Rio petted Latifa’s head gently. She stepped forward and buried her face into his chest.

“Hoho, it seems like she’s still at that age where she wants to be doted on,” Ursula mused, watching Latifa with a smile. Naturally, Ursula had also noticed that Latifa was acting strangely after Rio’s discussion with the elders, but she had refrained from intruding, and left the two to solve it amongst themselves. It was how the two of them had always done it, after all.

“She might be worried that her precious big brother will be taken from her by these newcomers. There’s a girl the same age as her, too,” Sara giggled. The others gazed at Latifa.

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“...I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Latifa mumbled quietly, tightening her grip around Rio. He made a torn expression as he hugged her, patting her back gently to calm her down. Eventually, her grip loosened.

“Okay. I’m going now, Latifa.” Rio slowly stepped back from Latifa and spoke kindly.

“...Yeah. I’ll be waiting.” Latifa gave a small nod.

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Two weeks later, in a forest on the western outskirts of Amande...

A creepy-looking man in a black robe stood in an area off the road, somewhere no regular citizens would ever pass through.

His name was Reiss.

Surrounding him was a swarm of creatures that had humanoid shapes. Eight had ashen-colored skin and four had skin that was dark to the point of appearing black, each groaning in eerily low tones.

“Fufufu... As expected of the city home to the Ricca Guild — the adventurers working here are all of excellent quality. I’ve obtained some good material thanks to that,” Reiss said to himself proudly as he looked at the grotesque creatures.

“Go, now. Form groups of three and search the forest outskirts of Amande for people that have as much essence as possible. Capture them alive and bring them here. However, make sure to avoid attacking those that have a higher essence than you. Kill as many witnesses as you need to avoid drawing unnecessary attention. I will take care of the western side, so you lot split off into the other directions to search. Your time limit is until sunset tomorrow.”

The strangely-shaped creatures began to move as though they understood Reiss’s words.

“Gruugh.” They formed four groups of two gray-skinned

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creatures to one dark-skinned leader, then set off at an unbelievably light and fast sprint.

"...Now, once I reach the necessary number of material bodies with this next run, the time will be right. After this last batch, I'll have to make sure to lie low for a while," Reiss said with annoyance in his voice, left alone by himself once the figures of the creatures had melted away into the forest. His eyes were completely vacant.

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Chapter 8: Operating in the Shadows

Two weeks after Rio departed from the spirit folk village…

Left behind in the Strahl region, Miharu and the others lived a completely peaceful life, leisurely waiting for Rio's return. Presently, they were in the middle of a break from their language studies. Aishia and Masato were both taking a nap, while Miharu and Aki sat on the living room sofa sipping tea.

"I wonder if Haruto will be back soon…?" Miharu mumbled to herself. While her words were formed as a question, she was more or less speaking to herself. Nonetheless, her mumbling still clearly reached Aki's ears.

"Miharu, you've been saying the same thing for a few days now," she said with a strained laugh.

For some reason, Miharu flinched. "Eh…? R-Really?" she asked in a high-pitched voice, inclining her head.

Miharu wasn't quite sure why she flinched, but now that Aki had mentioned it, she had been finding herself thinking about Haruto out of the blue these days.

"…What's wrong, Miharu?" Aki picked up on the delicate change in Miharu and watched her doubtfully.

"Nothing at all. Why?" Miharu put on a calm air and met Aki's gaze. Aki didn't seem entirely convinced, but changed the subject anyway. "It's nothing… But I do wonder how long we're going to live like this, yeah?"

"Umm, what do you mean by 'like this'?" Miharu asked.

"We should have been middle school and high school students, you know? Masato only just reached the sixth

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grade, and our new school lives were meant to start… But now Takahisa and Satsuki are both gone, and we may never meet Mom and the others ever again. I don't really know, but the longer this life continues, the more I feel like we won't be able to go back anymore." Aki's expression fell helplessly.

"So you're worried…" Miharu slowly stood up and moved next to Aki, stroking her back. Aki leaned into her to be doted upon.

"…Aren't you worried, Miharu?" she asked nervously.

"I am… a little uneasy, but probably not as much as you." Miharu shook her head with a faint smile.

Aki looked up at Miharu's face curiously. "Why?"

"I have you and Masato with me, as well as Ai-chan and Haruto. I feel safe. That's why I'm wondering if there's anything I could do in return, because I feel sorry that you're worried," Miharu answered. Her smile was bittersweet this time.

"…You're strong, Miharu."

"I'm weak. If I didn't have you and the others, I wouldn't be alive right now."

"I don't believe that… If anything, I should be saying that. I don't know where I'd be right now if I didn't have you with me."

"Hehe, thank you."

"Yeah…" Aki said shyly, still seeming to be a little unsure.

"Aki. Thanks to Haruto, we've been able to live so peacefully. I think that's an amazing blessing, don't you? So… how about you try to think a little more positively?" Miharu asked gently, trying to persuade Aki.

"That's… Yeah. I think so too, but…"

"I guess you still want to return to Earth, right?"

"Yeah… Don't you want to go back, Miharu?"

"If I said I didn't want to go home… that would probably be a lie, but I don't think there's any need to hurry. Haruto's

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willing to help us out, after all."

"Haruto..." Aki murmured Haruto's name, her expression turning gloomy. She was much better about it now, but she still couldn't help but think of someone in the back of her mind whenever she heard the name. In particular, when it was coming from Miharu's mouth, it sometimes left her feeling quite conflicted.

"What do you think of Haruto?" Aki suddenly asked Miharu. She had noticed that Miharu's mind had been on Haruto lately, so she was curious.

"Hm? Umm... What do you mean by that?" Miharu asked in return, watching Aki's expression with uncertainty.

"Nothing, really... It's just — even though you're normally bad around boys, you seem to act really natural when you're around Haruto... Being totally in sync when you're cooking together and laughing with each other. That's why I was just wondering... So, how do you feel about him?" Aki explained her question hesitantly, but directly, so that Miharu couldn't avoid answering her.

"H-How, I wonder? He's reliable, and a really nice person, I think. And..." Miharu replied timidly, searching within herself with a contemplative expression.

"...And?" Aki pressed.

"I don't know if it's because his name is the same, but he kind of reminds me of Haru-kun... I guess? Maybe?"

"W-What are you saying?! Miharu!" Aki's expression changed with a gasp, her tone of voice immediately turning rougher.

"...Huh? Ah! S-Sorry! That wasn't my intention!" Miharu belatedly processed what she had said out loud and shook her head in a fluster. While she had always made sure not to mention Haruto in front of Aki, thinking about the Haruto in this world made his name unintentionally slip out of her mouth.

"Hey, Miharu... Do you really still remember him? Even

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though you might never see him again? He probably doesn't remember you anymore, either, so don't confuse him with this Haruto. That would be rude," Aki snapped. She was filled with regret as soon as she finished speaking, because *she* had been the one overlapping this Haruto and Amakawa Haruto in her thoughts.

"...I'm sorry — I got too heated up about it. I'm going to go clear my head."

Aki stood up and went out the front door for some fresh air, her words filled with guilt.

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I'm such a fool...

As soon as Aki stepped through the door, she immediately crouched down outside the house in shame. She didn't want to be inside; despite being told not to leave the house for any reason, she wanted some fresh air.

I don't have any right to blame Miharu... Aki regretted bitterly, heaving a deep sigh. Even Miharu, who was typically of a warm disposition, might have become angry with her this time around.

Maybe Miharu still likes him after all? Then... should I apologize for saying such terrible things? But... A complicated emotion filled Aki — she wanted to apologize to Miharu and go back to the way things were, but whenever Amakawa Haruto's name came up, she couldn't help but recall everything about him.

"Argh, enough!" Aki yelled loudly after some time had passed, her head filled with too many thoughts to process.

"Uurgh..." A small groan sounded from a short distance away, but it was too soft to reach Aki's ears. The front door of the house opened and Miharu's hesitant figure appeared.

"U-Umm, you know, Aki. ...Huh? Kya!" She tried to shyly call out to Aki, but spotted two gray creatures instead. They

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were shaped like humans but clearly not human, and they sauntered about the forest roughly 20 meters away from the house. Miharu couldn't hold back her scream.

"W-What's wrong, Miharu? Eek! W-What is that?!" Aki had flinched in surprise at Miharu's scream, then followed her gaze; she recoiled in horror at the sight of the monstrous creatures.

Miharu snapped out of her fear with a gasp. "A-Aki, hurry inside the house! Now!" she called out in a fluster.

"B-But it's weird... Shouldn't there be a barrier keeping them out?" Aki observed the movements of the creatures carefully — it didn't seem like they had noticed her.

"No! Hurry and get Ai-chan, quickly," Miharu said fretfully, when Aishia materialized right beside her.

"It's okay... I'm already here." She had a somewhat sleepy expression and seemed to have just woken up.

Miharu let out a sigh of relief. "Ah, Ai-chan..."

"Aishia... W-What is that?" Aki asked her timidly.

"Monsters, probably. They can't enter the barrier, but they may be drawn to the essence of the barrier itself. I'll take care of this quickly — you two get inside," Aishia instructed Miharu and Aki as she vigilantly stared at the strange creatures.

Understanding they would be nothing but a hindrance, Miharu quickly ran over to Aki. "O-Okay. Let's go, Aki."

She pulled her by the hand toward the house. Once Aishia confirmed that they had left, she slowly started to walk forward.

"They're person-shaped, but don't seem to be human...?" Seeing the strange monsters gave her an eerie feeling, making her incline her head.

Their eyes were filled with madness, but other than their skin tones, they looked just like humans. That much was clear now that Aishia was closer to them... Though once she readjusted her thinking, the truth was that none of that

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mattered.

I'll find out if I defeat them… I must protect the others in this house. That was the role Haruto had given her.

With that in mind, Aishia held her right hand out toward the monsters. The faint light indicative of spirit arts started to flow from her hand as a sign of her refined ode manipulation.

Aishia fired a shock wave bullet at the monster — the invisible attack made direct contact, and a sound reminiscent of the impact of a hammer echoed as the monster's body was sent flying through the air. *Boom!*

The force was enough to turn a human's bones to dust.

Aishia adjusted her sights onto the remaining monster mercilessly.

"Uuuuuargh!"

Just then, another one leaped out of the forest. It was similar to the other two in terms of its humanoid shape, but its skin was darker. For some reason, the darker monster was able to easily slip through the barrier and rush straight for Miharu and Aki, who had retreated to the front door. It moved fairly quickly.

"Aki, get down!"

Miharu saw the black monster closing in on them and, as a last minute resort, used her own body as a shield to cover Aki, hugging her close.

"Eh?!" Aki was thrown off balance at the sudden movement, unsure of what was happening, though she could immediately tell that Miharu was covering her by holding herself close. Once she noticed the black monster approaching them, she understood why Miharu had done such a thing.

"M-Miharu?!" Aki couldn't help but yell. Miharu was in danger — it was evident there was nothing they could do, but Aki struggled and squirmed anyway.

Meanwhile, Aishia had reacted by aiming her right hand

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at the black monster, but she soon lowered it. The monster's death was certain, even without her lifting a hand.

There were several meters left until the black monster would reach Miharu and Aki, when a black shadow descended from the skies gracefully. Held in Miharu's embrace, Aki was able to see the figure from behind.

She immediately knew who it was.

Reflected in her eyes and dressed in the armor of the Black Wyvern was Rio's familiar figure.

"Aaugh?!" The black monster seemed to be taken aback at how Rio suddenly appeared before its eyes. Its speed fell for a moment, freezing on the spot — which proved to be a fatal mistake.

Rio immediately aimed for the opening the monster had created. He sprung forward with all his might and thrust the hilt of his sword with pinpoint accuracy into the solar plexus of the monster, blowing it back ten meters. A real human would have been wracked with unbearable pain and struggled for breath. If anything, the purely physical damage of the attack would have left them with ruptured organs.

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However, the dark monster held a hand against its abdomen as it staggered back to its feet. It didn't seem able to comprehend what had happened.

"Guuargh, aurgh?" it groaned curiously.

What was that texture just now? That monster was rock-hard. It seemed to have received some damage, but it still stood up after taking the hit... Even though I attacked it with the intention of incapacitating it... Rio observed the dark creature with wide eyes.

Meanwhile, Aishia approached and apologized with a regretful expression. "...Haruto, I'm sorry. Everyone was in danger."

"No, I'm sure you would have made it on time, Aishia. I may have stuck my neck in where it wasn't needed, but I'm glad it seems like I got back at just the right time. Sorry, you two. I came back late..." Rio shook his head with a strained smile, then looked at Miharu and Aki behind him.

"Ah, H-Haruto... Miharu, Haruto's here." Aki sighed in relief. Miharu timidly opened her eyes, having squeezed them shut, and turned around. "Haruto..." she called in a daze.

She looked up at his face with befuddled eyes; it was Rio's first time seeing her with such an expression.

"Everything's all right now," Rio said gently, pulling Miharu by the hand to help her stand up.

"...T-Thank you very much. Ah, s-sorry." Miharu accepted Rio's hand and stood up, but her knees still seemed to be weak. She staggered forward and leaned into him. He supported her in his arms, blushing with embarrassment. In the meantime, Aki stood up by herself.

"Aki, can I leave Miharu to you? The battle isn't over yet, so you two go inside the house. It'll be over quickly," Rio said with a wry smile.

"O-Okay." Aki nodded hesitantly before approaching Rio and supporting Miharu in Rio's place.

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Within a few seconds, Miharu and Aki had stepped inside the house, the door slamming shut behind them.

“Aishia, do you know what they are?” he asked Aishia, observing the three strangely shaped creatures once he had confirmed that Miharu and Aki had gone inside.

“I don’t know, but… it feels like they’re of a monster class. Also, the black one is probably strong,” Aishia explained broadly.

“I see. But they’re wounded already… though they still seem quite energetic.”

As Rio and Aishia quickly exchanged information, the black monster had already regained most of its vitality. It stood on two legs as it glared at them aggressively.

“The gray one I attacked seems to have recovered, too,” Aishia said, looking at the gray monster she had sent flying earlier.

“It doesn’t matter if they’re just naturally strong or have some kind of abnormal ability to recover; what we have to do doesn’t change. I’ll clean up the rest of them, so you stand back, Aishia.”

“Haruto, you don’t have to worry about me. It doesn’t matter if the opponents are human shaped or real humans, I won’t show any mercy to someone who stands in your way.” Aishia shook her head resolutely.

Rio hesitated for several moments. “…I see. Let’s split up and deal with them, then. I’ll take the black one… Can I leave the gray ones to you, Aishia?” he asked Aishia with a sigh.

“Of course,” Aishia nodded quietly.

“Guaargh!” The black monster seemed to have resolved to flee instead; it let out a loud roar to signal its retreat. In response, the gray ones groaned and turned on their heels to run away, too.

Do they have the intelligence to know to run away from opponents they can’t win against? With widened eyes, Rio watched their retreating forms.

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Rio and Aishia's forms disappeared from where they had stood, as they instantly closed in on the black and gray creatures respectively, moving in to attack.

"Gargh?!" When Rio appeared before the black monster, he twisted the enemy's body and slammed it against the ground. It didn't seem to have much effect, as the black monster got back up using its incredible reflexes, immediately moving to counterattack.

It's fast, but... Its movements are linear and its attacks are wide open.

Rio easily dodged the attack and drove his knee into the solar plexus he had wounded earlier.

"Gruh?" The black monster's body lifted up into the air. Rio grabbed his opponent's feet and swung it around, dislocating its joints as he smashed it into the ground. The black monster let out a pained groan.

"You sure are tough. Can you understand what I'm saying?" Rio asked, stepping on the abdomen of the black creature. Despite its different skin color, its shape was still human-like, so he wondered if it was possible to communicate with it.

"Gruuuugh." The monster could only give a low groan.

...No good, huh? What is this guy, anyway? Well, if it's a monster, it'd leave an enchanted gem, I guess.

With a sigh, Rio drew the blade at his waist. He had never seen nor heard of a monster like this before; in order to check whether it actually was a monster or not, Rio thrust his sword through the black creature's heart.

"Gragh!" The black creature yelled louder than ever as it struggled wildly. Even with a sword through its heart, it was still moving around. It had quite the stamina.

Somewhat shocked, Rio looked down at the black monster writhing in pain. Eventually, the black creature's struggling slowed down. "*Please kill me,*" it seemed to mouth slowly.

With widened eyes, Rio took in the movements of its

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mouth, then ended the black monster's life. With a clean snapping noise, its body started to break down into dust, leaving behind a huge heart-shaped blue gem.

So, it was a monster. But the way its mouth moved at the end… Rio picked up the enchanted gem left behind by the strange monster with a conflicted expression.

"Haruto, I'm done here, too." Aishia walked over with two enchanted gems in her hands. Her expression was so pure, it was as though her brutal mindset from earlier had been washed away entirely.

"…Thank you, Aishia. Shall we go inside? There's something I need to tell you." With a small smile, Rio led Aishia back inside the house.

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"I-I'm so sorry!"

Once Rio and Aishia stepped inside, Aki bowed her head, her face completely pale.

"Umm, why are you apologizing?" Rio asked, taken aback.

"Umm… Even though you said not to leave the house without a good reason, I went outside and caused Miharu to put herself in danger…"

"No, no… What happened just now was a pretty irregular event. But, well… Why did you go outside?" Rio asked with a troubled look.

Miharu defended Aki in a hurry. "U-Umm, it was my fault! I was being inconsiderate of Aki's feelings and made her angry…"

"That's not true! I… I… I'm sorry! I'm so sorry, Miharu. I'm sorry…" Tears started to stream down Aki's face as she spoke, clinging to Miharu, who gently patted Aki on the back with a distraught expression.

"It doesn't seem like I need to say anything more," Rio said with a smile.

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“Mm… Oh? Haruto’s back. Huh, are you crying, Aki?” A sleepy Masato appeared in the living room with a big yawn.

“I-I’m not! You carefree dummy!” Aki separated from Miharu in a fluster, turning away with a huff.

Masato tilted his head and peered at Aki’s face. “Hmm?”

“…That aside, it’s been decided that we’re moving,” Rio said, changing the subject rather forcefully out of consideration for Aki.

“Ooh, really?!” Masato asked, his attention diverted away from Aki to Rio.

“Yes. I’m sure it’s been stressful for you, being unable to go outside freely… and it must have been boring, but you’ll be able to live your lives comfortably in another location instead.”

“It’s true that all the studying has left my body all stiff… Wait, when are we moving?”

“I’m thinking tomorrow, maybe. But there are a few rules that have to be cleared up before we move. Let’s go over the details while we eat some snacks, shall we?” Rio said, then walked into the kitchen.

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The next morning, the five set out for the spirit folk village.

“We’ll move to our new location, now. The scenery before you will change in an instant, just like when you came to this world. It isn’t dangerous, though, so just relax,” Rio said to a rather nervous group after putting the stone house away into the Time-Space Cache.

“No… Actually, it’s more like we’re nervous wondering what the other people are like,” Masato said in an unusually flustered manner for him.

The other party they were about to meet were something else, after all. Everyone had received a clear explanation

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about the spirit folk and their village yesterday; elves, dwarves, and werebeasts — they were all beings that the fantasy-loving Masato was very familiar with, and something he admired greatly. There was no way he wouldn't be nervous.

"They're all amazingly nice people, so you'll make friends in no time. Now, let's go. Are we all ready?" Rio said with a smile, looking over at everyone.

"Yes, please," Miharu replied in a somewhat stiff voice, followed by Aki and Masato nodding in response.

"I'm ready anytime," Aishia agreed with her usual completely relaxed tone.

"Then, here we go. *Transilio!*" With a smile, Rio activated the teleportation crystal in his hand.

The air began to twist and bend intensely, enveloping the group. In the very next moment, they had disappeared from their original location and teleported to a place near the spirit folk village.

"O-Ooh... Yeah, this was it! This was the feeling I had when my vision suddenly warped back then..." Masato said, glancing around at his surroundings. Miharu and Aki's eyes were wandering about, too.

"There are many strange presences... they're similar to mine," Aishia inclined her head and murmured.

"That's probably the spirits of the village — it seems like spirits can sense each other's presence. The shyer spirits are good at suppressing their aura, but there are many spirits in the village," Rio said, taking a guess at the origin of what Aishia was feeling.

"There's a spirit with a really big aura."

"That's probably Dryas. A humanoid spirit like you, Aishia."

"There's another one... not Dryas, but another pretty big spirit is approaching this way," Aishia said, then looked up at the sky. At the end of her line of sight was Orphia's

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contract spirit, Ariel, closing in at a fairly rapid speed.

Aki's gaze fixed on Ariel's approach. "...A bird?"

"Isn't it pretty big? There are people riding on it..." Masato said with a dazed expression. While they were staring, Ariel's figure grew larger and larger, before finally arriving in the air above Rio's group. Ariel circled in the air as she began to lower her flight speed.

"There are... girls riding on it," Miharu murmured.

"They're all my very close friends, and —" Rio began to explain to Miharu, when one girl jumped off of Ariel first.

It was Latifa. She glanced at the faces of the newcomers, and her expression faltered for a moment. "...Welcome back, Onii-chan!"

She quickly took a breath to ready herself and ran at Rio, crashing into him with a hug.

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One afternoon, a bit before the sun set, somewhere in Strahl...

Reiss stood in the shadows of the forest that extended through the western outskirts of Amande. Surrounding him were several hideous monsters and men, who appeared to be adventurers, lying unconscious.

"...One squad didn't return. Don't tell me they were defeated... Defeating a squad of Revenants, especially with an enhanced body in the mix, is no simple feat," Reiss muttered dubiously.

My actions were a little flashy this time... the investigation squad from the city should be formed soon. Reiss tapped a hand against his mouth in thought, before letting out an annoyed sigh.

"Good grief. I guess I should lie low and keep an eye on things for a while... I've also been invited to Charles Arbor's wedding ceremony in two month's time. His bride is Celia

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Claire, if I recall... How a dimwit like that snagged such a catch is beyond me," he spat bitterly, before turning his gaze to the unconscious adventurers.

"...While the plan will have to be delayed for a while, the numbers have fallen. I guess I shall have to change the materials I have right here and now... How many will remain this time, I wonder?" Reiss grinned like a demon as he slowly walked toward the unconscious adventurers.

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Epilogue: To You, My Precious Person

One day, roughly two months after Rio and the others arrived at the spirit folk village… In the Kingdom of Beltrum — the capital of Beltrant — a young woman who looked to be in her mid teens was in the garden of the royal castle. Her name was Celia Claire: she was a count's daughter and the youngest person to graduate from the renowned Royal Academy of Beltrum.

Celia's long silver hair swayed in the wind as she sadly gazed at a single letter in her hands. The name Haruto was printed as the sender.

Celia knew the name; she had received a letter from a certain boy using that name once before, so she was convinced that that same boy was the one who wrote this letter, too.

The contents of the letter were straightforward and written in a familiar handwriting, stating that he would be late, but would definitely come to see her again.

"Hello, Celia… So you were here this whole time." A man in his mid-thirties appeared, putting on airs as he spoke to Celia. The man wore elegant knight's clothing with several medals pinned to his chest.

Celia hid the letter immediately and addressed the man — Charles Arbor — stiffly. "Sir Charles…"

Charles grinned at Celia smugly. "There's no need to be so formal. We'll be wedded next week, no? How about you call me 'darling' instead?"

"No, umm… That's a little… It's still a little embarrassing

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for me…” Celia ducked her head down and shyly bit her lip.

Charles laughed. “I do like your sense of chastity; it is lovely indeed. You even refuse to hold the hand of your fiance. I look forward to seeing how you change after our wedding.”

Goosebumps ran along Celia’s skin as she kept her head down, feigning embarrassment.

“Sir Charles, do you have a moment?” A knight suddenly appeared out of nowhere, calling for Charles.

“My, my… Just when I came to greet my adorable fiancee, work comes calling. In these times where the kingdom is in disarray, the busy duties of a large noble family never seem to cease,” Charles said, giving an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders as he expressed his disappointment.

“Everyone feels anxious without you around, Sir Charles. Please pay me no concern and go to them.” Celia gave an empty smile, trying to encourage Charles to go.

“Yes, I shall do that. I’ll come to visit you again soon, my dear.” Charles nodded in satisfaction, then turned on his heel and walked away with his subordinate.

Celia watched his retreating back and let out a deep sigh, then took the letter she had hidden away earlier back out and clutched it to her chest.

“Rio…” she whispered yearningly, on the verge of tears.

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Afterword

Hello, everyone — this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you very much for picking up *Seirei Gensouki, Volume 4: Eternal You*.

So, the fourth volume of the *Seirei Gensouki* novel has finally gone on sale. Two years ago, I would have never imagined myself having a career writing books, and now I've already released four volumes. You really don't know what'll happen to you in life.

That being said, I haven't quite gotten used to the idea of myself as an author, or maybe my identity as an author is still too weak, and I haven't quite gotten used to calling myself Yuri Kitayama.

For example, when someone suddenly calls me *Kitayama* out of the blue, I sometimes think: "Who's that?" in confusion... In another instance, someone from the editing department called me on the phone and I nearly answered with my real name; my nerves made my head completely blank and unable to recall my own series title, leaving me mumbling over my words. Embarrassing. (laughs)

But, well, as I'm living the busy author life doing this and that, I'm returning to my early days of writing for fun and enjoying it.

However, I seem to have trouble switching from my usual leisurely pace, so it takes me a while to get into the zone and my writing time is rather unstable. This is something I only noticed recently (I'm slow!).

Well, I'm also the type to get lost in concentration once I get in the zone, so I've been training myself to focus more consistently lately. Thanks to those efforts, the process of

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writing volume 4 felt like a much smoother experience.

Furthermore, with this volume, we finally get a glimpse of the heroine that appeared in volume 1 once more, so I was keen to finally start the real story from here onward. The subtitle “Eternal You” has a few different meanings, which will be revealed as the story continues. For now, I’d appreciate it if everyone took in the meaning in their own way after reading what happened in this volume.

I touched upon how the light novel version will have similarities to the web novel version — while also being an independent series on its own — in the afterword of the first volume. However, I believe the readers of both novels will find that the independence of this series has strengthened now with the release of volume four. The reason for this is that volume one through three have stuck to the storyline of the web novel fairly faithfully, but volume four has branched off from the web novel in order to include new adventurous developments and possibilities.

From here on out, there is a great chance volume five and beyond will get into parts of the story not covered in the web novel (some of which have been touched upon already), so readers who read the light novel alongside the web novel can look forward to those changes.

And, for readers who choose to only read the light novel and not the web novel, you may be able to enjoy this work more by comparing the differences to the web novel at a point further along in the light novel’s storyline (of course, the timing to read the web novel is the reader’s choice, and you are free to choose not to read the web novel at all).

With this, I have gone through great pains here and there with the light novel and web novel to make many ways of enjoying the series, but I’m sure the biggest thing on the readers’ minds is Professor Celia, who hasn’t appeared since volume one.

Professor Celia finally appeared at the very end of this

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volume, but I've had many readers tell me "Give us more Celia, quickly!" ever since volume one went on sale.

And so, to the 300,000 Professor Celia fans around the nation (this is an arbitrary number based on my own personal wishes [laughs]), thank you for waiting!

With volume five, it'll finally be Professor Celia's turn! I've actually had the subtitle of volume five decided ever since volume three went on sale, with all the events I wanted to write having been decided, so please look forward to what happens in volume five!

But, I also have good news for those who say: "I can't wait until volume five!"

At the same time as the sale of this volume, the completely free novel site "Yomeru! HJ Bunko," officially operated by HJ Bunko, will post side stories from the perspective of Professor Celia in the light novel *Seirei Gensouki* (timeline-wise, the stories take place after the epilogue of volume one).

Furthermore, I've also been interviewed by Light Novel News Online with the release of this volume, and thanks to them, I'll be hosting a signing event. Please check online for further details regarding those.

Finally, to everyone who has supported *Seirei Gensouki*, I'd like to use this space to thank you all. I am only here as an author thanks to all the wonderful support that everyone has given me. I hope we can continue our relationship for a long time.

Thank you very much.

30 April 2016 Yuuri Kitayama

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Bonus Short Stories

Your Warmth

The time was early morning, with less than a week having gone by since Rio began living with Miharu, Aki, and Masato.

Rio was sitting on the sofa in the living room of the rock, house, asleep. While there was no one else in the room with him at first, early riser would eventually appear — it was Miharu.

When she noticed him on the sofa, she tried to greet him cheerfully. “Ah, Haruto. Good morning…?” However, she soon noticed something was off about him, and her voice trailed off immediately. She approached hesitantly, noticing how papers were scattered across the table. On them were neatly organized graphs of letters and sentences.

This is… for us…?

Miharu could guess what the purpose of those papers were: they were language learning materials made for herself and the other two Japanese students. There was no mistaking it, as there were explanations of the Strahl grammar and vocabulary written on it in Japanese.

Rio must have stayed up late — or perhaps gotten up early — in order to create the learning materials for them. It made Miharu feel a bit apologetic towards him.

“Zzz… Zzz…”

Rio was sleeping peacefully with an expression that still held a sort of childish innocence.

He normally seems so mature, but he’s actually the same age as me, huh… Though he said he was a university

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student in his past life…

Because of Rio's ability to fly through the air and runat inhuman speeds, an outsider might think of him as superhuman… but someone like him could seemingly still feel tired, as well as sleep looking like this.

Miharu looked at Rio closely, examining him. He really did have a pretty face, she thought. Then, as she was looking at his appearance —

I wonder where Haru-kun is now?

A fleeting thought of her former childhood friend resurfaced in her mind. Why did she think of him just now? Miharu didn't even know herself. Perhaps it was because the boy sleeping before her had the same name as her childhood friend.

After Miharu had been staring at Rio for a while, she breathed a gasp of realization.

Ah, he's going to catch a cold like this! I'll go get a blanket!

She headed towards her own room in a hurry. Less than a minute later, Miharu returned to the living room in a flurry of footsteps, carrying a blanket in her arms.

Miharu placed the blanket over Rio gently, careful not to wake him up. Since she had just used the blanket herself mere moments ago, it was still cozy with a lingering warmth.

I can't just walk into Haruto's room without permission, so it should be fine if he uses mine… Right…?

Miharu faltered briefly, but eventually decided to timidly place the blanket over Rio.

"There we go," she said in a quiet voice, gently lowering the blanket. Rio's eyes suddenly blinked open.

"Huh? Ah…" Miharu let out a surprised sound. She was leaning towards Rio, so their faces were staring at each other at an extremely close distance. The two of them froze, just like that.

"U-Umm. I was worried you'd be cold, so I got a

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blanket…” Miharu said in a high-pitched voice with a blush to her cheeks.

“O-Oh, I see. Thank you very much.” Rio nodded reflexively, pulling the blanket closer to him.

However, there was a strange warmth to the blanket that was just placed on him…. Almost as though it was used moments before it had been given to him. When Rio realized that fact, he glanced down at the blanket. Sure enough, it wasn’t the one he usually used.

Huh? Could this possibly be Miharu’s…?

It had the same pattern as the blanket he had given to Miharu to use. Dumbfounded, Rio froze again.

“Umm, I’m going to make breakfast right now, so feel free to rest a little longer. Ah, or would you rather go back to your room to sleep?” Miharu asked; she didn’t seem particularly bothered, asking questions that showed more concern for Rio.

“No… I’m fine here,” Rio replied, promptly shaking his head. The warmth of the blanket was so comfortable, it seeped into his skin like a nostalgic memory, making him reluctant to part with it.

You ARE Wearing Them… Right?

One night, several days after Miharu and the others started living in the rock house…

After taking his bath, Rio returned to the living room. There, Miharu and Aishia were sitting next to each other on the couch, drinking tea. But when Rio saw Aishia’s appearance, his eyes widened in shock.

“Huh? Aishia, those clothes…”

“… It’s Haruto’s shirt.”

Indeed, Aishia was wearing Rio’s shirt.

“Umm, I know Ai-chan can make her own clothes, but she’s always wearing the same thing… So I told her it might

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be better if she had pajamas to sleep in, and she came back wearing your clothes," Miharu explained nervously.

"Ahaha, I see..." Rio gave a strained smile of understanding, then looked at Aishia.

"It's comfortable." Aishia raised both her arms and flapped them to show off the shirt.

"Maybe we should buy some clothes for Aishia after all? Even though she said she didn't need any the first time we went shopping... What do you think, Miharu?"

"Umm, I was surprised when her clothes suddenly disappeared when we went to take a bath. And what happens when she's asleep or unconscious? Will that be okay?"

"Aah, I see..." At Miharu's hesitant words, Rio smiled guiltily, trying to mask his thoughts. He had recalled the time when Aishia had crawled into his bed completely naked.

"Come to think of it, what would happen if Ai-chan took off her usual clothes?" Miharu asked Aishia as the thought suddenly crossed her mind.

"They disappear if they leave my side," Aishia replied plainly.

"I-I see..." Miharu nodded, slightly bewildered.

"Haruto, can I sleep wearing this today?"

"I don't mind if you wear it, but... don't you sleep in your spirit form?"

If she was in her spirit form, she wouldn't be able to wear any clothes.

"I'm sleeping with Miharu today."

"Ah, I see. Then... it should be fine, I think? I guess it's almost like a one-piece dress..." Rio nodded in confusion, looking at Aishia's frame.

Because she was wearing a men's shirt, the size was completely wrong; it was in danger of falling off at any moment. Not to mention the abnormally large amount of

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exposed skin on the lower half of her body.

It was all such a sight for sore eyes. Rio averted his gaze awkwardly.

“Ai-chan, I can lend you my clothes instead?” Miharu questioned; she must have had a similar thought to Rio.

Aishia shook her head bluntly. “I’m fine.”

“Haha,” Rio laughed dryly. Miharu also found herself at a loss for words.

“I’m starting to get sleepy.”

With a small yawn, Aishia heavily slumped over the sofa. Her appearance was so defenseless, that sure enough, her shirt fell loose.

Miharu tried to get Aishia to sit up in a fluster. “Ai-chan, you’ll catch a cold if you sleep here. Shall we go to my room…?!” Suddenly, her gaze was drawn to the shirttail that was only barely covering Aishia’s exposed rear, and she choked on her words.

“…Miharu?” Rio asked Miharu quizzically.

“Haruto!” Miharu called in a hurry.

“Y-Yes?”

“Y-You didn’t see, right?!” she asked frantically.

“Huh? Uh, right.” Unsure of what was going on, Rio cocked his head in confusion.

“Thank goodness…” Miharu sighed in relief, before making Aishia sit up in a hurry. “A-Ai-chan, get up!”

“Mm…” Aishia sat up languidly.

Miharu took a deep breath. “Umm, Ai-chan. You *are* wearing them… right?” she asked in a quiet and shy voice.

“…Wearing what?”

“Um… your underwear.”

“Nope.” Aishia shook her head calmly.

“Wha—?! T-That’s no good! You’re a girl! What if Haruto sees you?!” Miharu yelled, her face completely pale.

“I don’t mind if it’s Haruto, though.” Aishia looked at Rio and inclined her head curiously.

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Miharu was utterly shaken. “Y-You *have* to mind! Geez! Haruto, can we take Aishia shopping tomorrow?!” she asked, turning to Rio.

“Y-Yes, let’s go. As soon as possible.” Rio nodded with debilitating embarrassment.

Welcome Home, Master

One day, Rio opened the door to his rock house —

“Welcome home, master.”

— with Miharu standing there, greeting him with a springy voice and an adorable smile.

“M-Miharu…?” Rio’s eyes widened with dumbfounded surprise.

Miharu was wearing what could only be described as a maid outfit; she elegantly pinched the classic long skirt with her fingertips. After Rio remained frozen, she looked up at his face.

“Umm, is something the matter, Master? Have I made an error somewhere?” she asked worriedly.

Rio shook his head, his voice coming out flustered. “Huh? Ah, no, you’re not lacking in anything! There’s no way you could!”

“Thank goodness,” Miharu said with a sigh of relief. “But, Master… are you feeling well? Your face seems rather red… Ah, please excuse me.” She stared at Rio’s face closely, then hesitantly reached a hand out to his cheek.

Rio flinched. “Huh?!”

“Umm, Master… I think you may have a fever after all. I’d like to check properly… Will you bend over a little? I’m too short to reach…” Miharu stretched upwards as much as she could in front of Rio, looking apologetic as she spoke.

“Y-Yeah, sure.” Rio promptly bent his knees and lowered the position of his face, so that Miharu was able to place her forehead against Rio’s.

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“…You really do have a fever,” she murmured anxiously.

“N-No, this isn’t a fever. Ah, but I may indeed be feverish right now…” Rio denied it in a haste, then tried to come up with an explanation.

“Master, you should lie down immediately. I’ll do my best to nurse you to full health! Master is always working so hard… Don’t you think you deserve to rest for today?” Miharu asked enthusiastically, then tightly grabbed Rio’s hand.

“Huh…? Ah, yes.” Unable to meet Miharu’s eyes, Rio stared down at their clasped hands as he nodded nervously.

“Ah, I-I’m sorry. I touched Master with too much familiarity…” With a red face, Miharu apologetically let go of Rio’s hand, but he reached for her hand back.

“N-No, that’s not true! Could you take me to my bedroom?” he asked.

“Y-Yes, of course.” Miharu’s cheeks flushed even more as she agreed with a bashful smile. She led him to his bedroom, her hand still in his.

Miharu made Rio sit on his bed. “Master… I’ll wipe your sweat for you, so would you please remove your clothes?” she offered.

Rio was taken aback. “Eeh?! N-No, that’s asking for too much…” he said disapprovingly.

“N-No, this is my job! That is, umm… unless you don’t want it?” Despite Miharu gathering up her courage to protest, the last part of her question was asked with caution.

Rio nodded hesitantly. “…Umm, only if you don’t mind, then.”

Miharu shook her head. “I don’t mind at all! I’m happy to do so! Because I…! Ah, no, umm…” However, she lost her momentum in the middle of her exclamation and ducked her head in embarrassment.

“…Miharu?” Rio said, watching her expression carefully.

“Ah, no. It’s nothing. Ehehe… I should get to wiping your

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sweat already.” Miharu smiled shyly, then shook her head to dismiss the topic.

Rio nodded hesitantly once more. “...All right.”

Isn’t Miharu acting a little weird today? ...Wait, what’s more weird is the situation right now! Why has Miharu become my maid?!

Snapping back to his senses with a gasp, Rio writhed his entire body in agony. Suddenly, he could feel his consciousness rapidly coming to.

“...Huh?!” Rio sprung up from where he lay in bed. He opened his eyes with a blink and his vision suddenly changed to the familiar sight of his bedroom.

For some reason, Aishia was standing right next to him, wearing the same maid outfit that Miharu had been wearing.

“Good morning, Master,” she said, inclining her head.

...So it was a dream. I must be tired.

Rio’s face twitched as he sighed and fell back against his bed. His mind gradually grew hazy once more.

“Good night, Master?” he thought he heard a voice say.

Your Red Cheeks are because of the fever, right?

On a day roughly two weeks after Miharu, Aki, and Masato began living with Rio, Miharu had exerted herself too much trying to get used to her new life and came down with a fever.

Rio noticed something was wrong with her expression as they were making breakfast, then immediately checked on her condition and sent her to rest in her room.

He handed Miharu a mug filled with elven-made medicine. “It’s probably a cold. If you take this medicine and rest, your fever should go down by nightfall. You should stay in this room and relax.”

“...Okay. I’m sorry,” Miharu apologized with a reddened

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face.

“What are you apologizing for?” Rio asked with a soft smile.

“Umm, for causing you trouble…”

“You’re no trouble at all, Miharu. You’re working your hardest -- if anything, you’re working *too*hard. You’re even doing over half the housework.”

“That’s just my job…” she said gloomily.

“Hmm, maybe I’ve been putting too much of a burden on you.” Rio smiled wryly.

Miharu shook her head in a hurry. “N-No, not at all. If anything, we’re causing all the burden for you, Haruto.” She knew that Rio had been cutting back on his sleeping hours in order to make more learning material for their language lessons.

“I don’t consider it a burden at all. Actually, I’m having quite a bit of fun.”

“Then, so am I.”

“Ahaha… I’m happy to hear you say that. Well, let’s focus on getting you back to full health for now. Please leave the housework to me today.”

“…Okay. I appreciate it.” Miharu still seemed rather apologetic, as she faltered for a moment before agreeing.

“Just leave it to me.”

Rio nodded kindly, then left the room quickly to allow Miharu to rest quietly. Once the door closed with a click, Miharu was left by herself.

She looked around. Miharu was rarely ever in her room other than to sleep, so it was a new feeling that left her somewhat restless. Or, perhaps it was because she couldn’t calm down if she wasn’t doing housework. And so, she remained in a state of distress for a while, until a knock reverberated on her door.

“Come in… A-Ai-chan?”

Once Miharu gave permission for entry, the door opened

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to reveal Aishia carrying a bucket and cloth.

“Good morning, Miharu. Your fever okay?”

“Yup, I’m fine.” Miharu nodded cheerfully.

“I’ll nurse you… Wipe your sweat away,” Aishia offered to take care of Miharu.

“Umm… I’m fine, though?”

“You don’t need… nursing?”

Aishia peered at Miharu’s face as though to confirm if she was really okay.

“Ah… umm. Then, can I ask you to wipe my sweat away?” Miharu felt the need to respond to Aishia’s sincerity and nodded in a slight fluster.

“Got it. Then, strip.” With a single nod, Aishia walked towards where Miharu was lying in the bed.

“O-Okay.” Miharu nervously stripped herself of her top.

“Show me your back.”

“Okay.” Miharu followed Aishia’s orders and turned her back around shyly. Immediately, a cool hand towel made contact with her back.

“Eek?!” Miharu flinched.

“Is it cold?” Aishia took the cloth away from her body, but Miharu shook her head with a strained laugh.

“I-It’s fine. I was just surprised at how sudden it was.”

“I’m going to continue, then.”

“Please do.”

Aishia started to wipe Miharu’s back once more with the wet cloth, but Miharu let out a ticklish sound.

“Mmh… ah.”

“You okay?” Aishia’s hand stopped once more.

“Y-Yup. But could you wipe a little more slowly? Ahaha.”

“Got it.” Obeying Miharu’s request, Aishia resumed wiping Miharu’s back.

“Ngh…”

Aishia’s hand moved in a rather bold way, reaching straight for all the risky spots directly. Though her wiping

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speed had slowed, it actually made her feel more flustered, as it had steadily stimulated Miharu's skin.

However, Miharu felt guilty for continuing to speak up, so she endured it. Then, another knock of the door echoed through the room, but Miharu was so focused on staying calm that she didn't notice the sound.

Aishia, who heard the sound clearly, stood up instead.

"Huh? What's wrong, Ai-chan?" The sudden halt of Aishia's hand made Miharu look up in question.

"A knock. Haruto's here," Aishia informed her shortly, before striding over to the door to open it.

"...Huh? Huh?!"

Miharu raised her voice in confusion and looked over at the door. There stood a dumbfounded Rio, frozen with a tray of food he had made for her. Rio and Miharu both watched each other in a state of shock, their faces gradually reddening.

"I-I'm sorry!" they both apologized together. Miharu covered her body with her blanket in a panic. Rio also averted his eyes as fast as humanly possible, then retreated to the living room with rapid speed.

That night, after Miharu's fever had completely gone down, her cheeks would redden every time she looked at Rio's face, making Aki and Masato worry about her.

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